

IN FOCUS: Non-Western Historiography?

A Polemic

Introduction

by AHMET GÜRATA AND LOUISE SPENCE

History, as we know it, is full of uncertainties, insufficiencies, unsatisfying or partially obstructed views of the world. Scholars stretch to recover blank spaces. We strain to fill the gaps, to explain the connections. We leap into ruptures in hopes of finding new approaches, details, anecdotes, and patterns of recurrence that will make our descriptions fuller, more vivid, less deficient. And we form histories that describe the world based on the knowledge we have acquired. But, of course, our knowledge of the world is never merely descriptive. Description is never ideologically or cognitively neutral. When we describe, we classify, we generalize, we impose hierarchal values. As Aijaz Ahmad and others have pointed out, to “describe” is to specify, to contain, and to produce knowledge that is “bound by that act of descriptive construction.” When we describe, we “specify a locus of meaning.”¹ Media history is no different.

John Patrick Leary argues in a recent *Social Text* article that to understand the history of Venezuela’s Catia TVE would necessitate a history of Caracas’s neighborhoods (many of them unmarked on maps, many of them illegal squatters’ settlements on public or private land), and their transformations since the 1950s oil boom.² Leary stretches. He increases the variables relevant for thinking about Venezuelan television, and in doing so he moves the locus of meaning from television itself and the domestic as its site, to the transgressions intrinsic to barrio expansion and to attempts to build and fortify communities. And he introduces an urban imaginary that may have no correspondence in Western European or North American cities.

1 Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 6.

2 John Patrick Leary, “TV Urgente: Urban Exclusion, Civil Society, and the Politics of Television in Venezuela,” *Social Text* 99, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 25–53.

Brian Larkin, studying the Muslim Hausa city of Kano in northern Nigeria, writes about the 1944 introduction of radio in colonial Kano, and how the public loudspeakers' rediffusion of the BBC broadcasts "embodied leisure time." In a culture where the rhythms of agricultural work and religious practice were the prime demarcators of time, "the colonially imposed division between work and nonwork as organizing principles of the day was new and yet to be internalized."³ By dividing the radio transmission into foreign-language service during work hours, and local vernacular service "when the workday (as defined by the Europeans) was finished," the British "materialized leisure time in sound waves . . . creating a new experiential rhythm to the day," even when the transmissions were unintelligible to a large number of the listeners who were unfamiliar with English and some of the vernacular languages. Their very unintelligibility carried a promise of the colonial ideal of progress "by suggesting that while the signal is incoherent now, the future of the individual and society as a whole is comprehension."⁴ Noise communicates. Critically engaging with and questioning Western assumptions about commercial goods and modernity, Larkin provides a different genealogy for the emergence of radio in Kano. His history of northern Nigerian media employs analytical criteria that are socially specific to suggest the epistemic uncertainty produced by new technologies and how the intentions of the British (to construct an ideal colonial subject that was progressive, mutable, and politically quiescent), the technical capacity of radio, and its social and religious context were linked and governed not by commodity relations but by the political relations of national development.⁵

These examples provoke many questions: Are the social and theoretical presuppositions implicit in the analytical tools and operations of mainstream Euro-American film/TV/radio history appropriate or relevant to all contexts? Is the way we have been writing film and media histories based on certain generally "accepted" resources, framing devices, and parameters of understanding? Are these resources, framing devices, and parameters based on the Euro-American context, and Euro-American considerations and constraints? And are these resources, framing devices, and parameters really indispensable, borrowing from Hayden White, to the process of translating knowing into telling?⁶ Perhaps different forms of understanding, different structures of time, and different notions of "place" and "community" define non-Western media histories.

What constitutes a legitimate object of analysis? Can we, for example, separate film history from neighborhood developments, from national development, from the implementation and penetration of television, or even cyberculture in some locales? What local circumstances might influence a history's narrative? This might include such concrete factors as cultural imperialism or subjugation to global market forces,

3 Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 52.

4 *Ibid.*, 53.

5 *Ibid.*, 59, 78, 126.

6 Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1.

certainly, but also the industrialization of electricity, the availability of equipment and film stock, the existence of film schools, of archives, the level of commercialism of local industries, local definitions of the “authentic,” local definitions of “modernity,” curfews during certain eras, religious prohibitions against certain representations, or social prohibitions against public assembly. If we unquestioningly accept the Euro-American historical models, do we risk overlooking the ways other people and cultures have created their own analytical tools and conceptual categories?

If we examine only institutions and practices that are characteristic of Western cinema and media history while taking no notice of those institutions and practices that may be important in the local context but do not have parallels in Western experience (or if we simply disregard such institutions and practices as anomalies), we lose the unique circumstances of other contexts and experiences. Do epistemic and sensual perceptions, for instance, cross borders without change? What about Western criteria of periodization? Or of genres? In Turkey, for example, in the 1970s, a type of movie marketed specifically to female spectators was known as “family films” (*aile filmleri*) to differentiate them from the popular “sex films” (*seks filmleri*), mildly salacious comedies with female nudity. “Family films” were Manichean cross-class love stories that navigated modern and traditional values. The female lead was often a singer, and the movies could contain as many as six to ten musical performances.⁷ Here, Western industrial definitions of “melodrama” or “musical” would lend little insight into the circumstances that allowed these texts to speak meaningfully to 1970s Turkish audiences.

But if claims of Euro-American origins are rejected altogether, the nativist extreme, we run the risk of overlooking ways that local culture has been altered and sometimes transformed by Euro-American media and Euro-American culture. We must be careful, therefore, to avoid essentialist or purist understandings of “culture”—or “nation”—while looking at the ways a designated history negotiates and challenges Euro-American constructs. Resistance and creative adaptation, blending and cross-fertilization, have been the norm in most cases.

Writing history is not a neutral or innocent process. Cinema and media histories are sociological and ideological constructs that make certain aesthetic and cultural assumptions. Hayden White has elaborated the similarities between imaginary and factual narratives. It is common to think of the fiction writer fabricating his or her stories, and the historian simply “finding” them in the world. But this “obscures the extent to which ‘invention’ also plays a part in the historian’s operations.”⁸ Think for a moment of Larkin’s descriptions of Kano’s public listening stations as generating “the laws and personnel necessary to maintain them, the national languages to make them work, the ordering of time, and the regulation of space.” All of this contributes to the idea that exposure to new technology is not simply a question of having access to ideas from elsewhere, but actually constitutes “a positive good in and of itself.”⁹

7 Abisel Nilgün, *Türk Sineması Üzerine Yazılar* (Ankara: Imge Kitabevi, 1994), 69.

8 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 6–7.

9 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 59.

While similarities may exist among film and media industries that occupy analogous positions in the transnational capitalist system, we cannot (or should not) construct a typology that freezes or de-historicizes the events and situations of specific locales so that they become “epistemological impossibilities.”¹⁰ Is the separation between the public and the private that has marked Western capitalism, and characterized the Western urban intelligentsia, for instance, also a part of Latin American, African, Asian, or Middle Eastern social reality? Capitalism itself, even when it may dominate, cannot be universalized, as class formations as well as relations to the metropolises and circuits of exchange differ, both internationally and within particular areas. Nor can modernism be universalized. It, too, is experienced differently in different contexts.¹¹ Because we are dealing with technologies that are not outside modern systems of production, does it mean that we should read their histories solely within capitalist ideologies? Leary’s discussion of the history of *Catia TVe*, for example, does not analyze it as capitalism’s “Other.” Rather, his discussion of *Catia TVe* involves notions of collectivity and community that are seldom part of Western historiography or even part of descriptions of Western leftist output, even though they have been current in much black and feminist filmmaking and theory within the postmodern US and UK for decades.

The examples of non-Western histories that follow do not form a cogent narrative. Nor do they formulate a short course in non-Western historiography. But they do, we hope, illustrate the historical richness of considering cinema in local contexts without imposing the criteria and methods, the social and theoretical presuppositions, embedded in Euro-American historiography. We do not wish to imply that there is a single or hegemonic “non-Western” historiography. India and Mexico (despite the fact that both have experienced colonialism and imperialism, although in extremely different ways) do not have a common history. Nor do their media industries or the circulation of their products have much in common. And there are differing ideological inflections to their views of the nation-state, “nationalism,” and even “cultural production,” as well as different psychic and political attitudes toward their own history.

We suggest demolishing, not reversing, binary hierarchies. Decentering Euro-American epistemologies does not mean replacing them with “correct” ones; it means destabilizing the idea of a single sense of authority, opening up our sense of history to multiple authorities, and valuing the subsequent instability of multifaceted,

10 Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness,” 5.

11 This became clear in debates over the film language of Japanese cinema from the mid-1970s on. See, for example, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, “Space and Narration in the Films of Ozu,” *Screen* 17, no. 1 (1976): 41–73; Kristin Thompson, “Notes on the Spatial System of Ozu’s Early Films,” *Wide Angle* 1, no. 4 (1977): 8–17; Paul Willemsen, “Notes on Subjectivity,” *Screen* 19, no. 1 (1978): 41–70; Noel Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); David Bordwell, “Our Dream Cinema: Western Historiography and the Japanese Film,” *Film Reader* 4 (1979–1980), 44–62; Peter Lehman, “The Mysterious Orient, the Crystal Clear Orient, the Non-Existent Orient: Dilemmas of Western Scholars of Japanese Film,” *Journal of Film and Video* 39, no. 1 (1987): 5–15; Chris Berry, “Our Problem Cinema: The Challenge of Japanese Cinema,” *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 4, no. 1 (1990): 193–217; and Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, “The Difficulty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order,” *Boundary 2*, 18, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 242–257. There are, of course, many other discussions of modernism and cinema, for instance, Miriam Bratu Hansen’s work, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 59–77; and “Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism,” *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10–22.

intertwining modes of analysis.¹² While the examples here, and the essays that follow, do not suggest a particular non-Western historiography, they do suggest that it may be time to rethink and reevaluate how we commonly “do” film and media history, and to encourage Euro-American historians to ask questions about their historiographic traditions which they have not heretofore asked. It may be possible to see that theories of history are themselves grounded in historical, ideological, and geographic contexts. *

12 Trinh T. Minh-ha discusses the “disorder inherent in every order.” See “Documentary Is/Not a Name,” *October* 52 (Summer 1990): 95.

In the Centrifuge of History

by RAVI VASUDEVAN

This article uses the cinemas of South Asia to outline an argument for how to think of film history outside the familiar paradigms of national cinemas, and of global cinemas that take Hollywood as their main reference point. At the outset, I will outline a certain conundrum that defines the trajectory of Film Studies and history in this part of the world. As part of a broader postcolonial agenda, the emergence of an academic field for Film Studies in India was caught up with understanding the complexity of aesthetic and political challenges faced by Indian filmmakers under colonialism. This involved exploring how traditions of iconography and representation, of performance and audience cultures came together with new technologies of mechanical reproduction and new capacities to generate audiences.¹ Subsequently, art historical and visual studies and anthropological research have demonstrated the wide range of interrelated transformations taking place in the aesthetic sphere under colonialism, challenging hermetic approaches to film history.² Along with the new skills associated with the camera, it was recognized that a host of others, in visual figuration, melodic

1 Ashish Rajadhyaksha, “The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology,” *Journal of Arts and Ideas* 14–15 (1987): 47–78.

2 See, for example, Tapati Guha Thakurta, *The Making of a “New” Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

articulation, set design, and so on, arose from a complex matrix of traditions that left their imprint on a range of media, from radio and gramophone to popular print culture and cinema. It is now possible to see these currents of research mapping a distinctly centrifugal logic for the field: history is intelligible as distributed into various elements, which in turn, implies several histories; this means that an understanding of the object, cinema, can only emerge from its dispersal. This poses a further question: If the object can only be adequately accessed through a web of diverse practices, then why should it be worthy of singular attention? What is the rationale for film history as opposed to, say, the history of art, popular visual, narrative, and performance cultures under regimes of mechanical production, reproduction, and extended circulation?

Even if we keep our sight lines focused on the cinema, we increasingly discern a powerfully decentered logic of practices. In this short essay, I will focus on how the cinema in the subcontinent was defined by, among other features, differences in the technologies and reception contexts through which film circulated, featuring the apparently obsolete alongside the novel. If the temporality of the cinematic institution and apparatus comes under review in such a centrifugal history, I will also consider how cinema as a form and institutional matrix becomes dispersed in space, as constituent elements in its makeup are distributed in a wide territorial network. I will conclude by coming back to my opening question: What is the status and value of a film history as opposed to a more general and dispersed field of exploration?

“Microcinema” and Heterogeneous Time. Researching the history of that early form of film projector, the bioscope, and its afterlives in the subcontinent, Sudhir Mahadevan argues for the “obviation of obsolescence.”³ His research not only maps early cinema practices but also proposes a specific angle, the small-scale technology of the early projector, and the wider phenomenon of the traveling cinema, as ways of navigating cinema history. In Mahadevan’s work, the bioscopewallah is not something residual, a leftover curiosity, or marker of cinematic cultures in “backward” or “developing” cultures. He also provides a way of thinking about cinema, exhibition, and viewership through a specific dynamic. At one level his work involves altering focus to capture cinema at the interstices of laws, institutions, and settled formats, thereby generating a perspective for the field that shifts from the formal institutions of cinema—the licensed, permanent cinema theater subject to various types of regulation—to informal, small-scale gatherings at street corners and inside tenement buildings. Add to this the persistence of traveling cinemas that cater to small-town and rural markets, and he presents us with more than simply a minority practice.

Furthermore, it might be argued that the bioscope carries genealogical features that relate it to a host of practices that weave into the contemporary film/media sphere. Mahadevan’s work on this early technology showcases a particular

3 Sudhir Mahadevan, “Travelling Showmen, Makeshift Cinemas: The Bioscopewallah and Early Cinema History in India,” *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 27–47.

coordination of the elements which compose the cinema—in projection, viewing situation, and audience congregation—and offers a mobile model and apparatus that are echoed in a number of different settings. Such a model could work in parallel formations with different technologies, contents, and objectives, for example, in instructional and pedagogical practices, as in 16mm projectors for classroom use, in mobile vans used for village instruction and propaganda work, and in the new conditions produced by digital technologies.⁴ This would include the informal video theater organized in makeshift settings and catering to specific populations; we might consider, then, uses that are at once informal, privatized, and yet collective. This includes renting videocassettes or DVD players for group screenings. Parallels with contemporary digital cultures emerge in another feature of bioscope practices: its habitation in a culture of recycling, both of apparatus and the material viewed. While the bioscopewallah may indeed organize material and create montage effects through splicing, the contemporary DVD network is more commonly organized around the appeal of the latest film release, acquired through the pirate network.⁵ However, as we know, mainstream commercial films have not only been objects of desire in and of themselves; they have also been remade through the digital network, most famously in the reediting of George Lucas's Star Wars sequel, *The Phantom Menace* (1999).⁶

Instead of a linear succession of technologies and formats, we have here a suggestive threading of what we could call microcinema effects through a panoply of small-scale forms, some persistent, others novel, but all in some morphological relationship to each other. While these lie outside the loop of the big institutional history, they still draw upon the materials of that more spectacular chronology, even if they are not strictly in sync with it. Thus, the bioscopewallah uses recycled cinema reels, sometimes of archaic provenance, while the video shop retails the “latest” Hindi or Hollywood movie. As the materials of cinema become distributed in this way, film history itself appears to demand a heterogeneous timescale, such that the mainstream public format appears as only one element in a menu of historical possibilities. Of course, we must acknowledge that the big form remains pertinent as a model of cinematic pleasure involving stardom, and that modes of engaging emotions and sense perception still tend to derive from the mainstream format. At the same time, there have been mutations in

4 For the importance of these “useful” forms of cinema, see Charles Acland, “Curtains, Carts and the Mobile Screen,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 148–166; see also Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), for an account of colonial uses of mobile vans for rural instruction and propaganda in Nigeria, and also for the importance of low-quality equipment in film and video cultures.

5 For contemporary film and new media practices in India, see Media Researchers @Sarai, “Complicating the City: Media Itineraries,” *Sarai Reader 05: Bare Acts* (Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies [CSDS], 2005), 258–286, and www.sarai.net (accessed February 12, 2010); Ravi Sundaram, *Pirate Modernity: Delhi's Media Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2009); Raqs Media Collective, “X Notes on Practice: Stubborn Structures and Insistent Seepage in a Networked World,” in *Immaterial Labour: Work, Research and Art*, ed. Marina Vishmidt and Melanie Gilligan (New York: Black Dog Publishing, 2003), 209–227; and Lawrence Liang, “Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation,” *Sarai Reader 05: Bare Acts*, 6–17.

6 See, for example, “Remake Your Own Hollywood Movie,” <http://www.make-digital.com/make/vol12/?pg=85PhantomMenace> (accessed February 12, 2010).

the wake of new technologies and digital formats, as new production and distribution infrastructures emerge in a host of local and regional circuits.⁷

The bioscope—and mobile and portable forms more generally—are the stuff of microcinema, and have a story to tell which urges a reframing of cinema periodization. Along with a cluster of other phenomena, they also urge us to reconsider the geographies of film circulation. Mahadevan argues for a contrast, for example, between western and eastern India, the slower pace of industrialization and modern urbanization providing the ground for a longer history of traveling cinema in Bengal. Elsewhere, in the southern state of Tamilnadu, rural electrification facilitated a more extensive institution of cinema theaters than was available in most parts of the country. But here I want to shift spatial registers, away from the deceptively small but significant story to a larger geographical narrative, which has crucial implications for writing cinema history. This lies in the formation of regional markets of various types, territories related to the dispersed linguistic and cultural elements which compose the cinema. The coordination of these elements mutated, as new centers emerged in the wake of shifts in financial backing and migratory patterns, and in the face of seismic political transformations such as the Partition of the subcontinent.

New Geographies and Histories. Recent research on Hindi-Urdu cinema has indicated how film production mutated to induct and address changing cultural configurations of the film market. In a wonderfully rich social and cultural history of early Bombay cinema, Kaushik Bhaumik has pointed to a number of crucial moments in the changing configurations of business enterprise and regional literary, theatrical, and musical cultures.⁸ While the Hindi-Urdu cinema of this period was produced in a number of different locations and through dual language versions in a linguistically diverse society, two major centers for its production lay in Bombay, in western India, and Lahore, the major city of the Punjab states of North India, which later became part of Pakistan. Bhaumik argues for the development of a transregional format for Bombay productions in the late silent and early sound period, with elements culled from a range of different sources, including Punjab entrepreneurship and finance, and the broader traditions of an “Islamicate” culture of the bazaar in the north Indian market. The latter was composed of hybrid genres, including costume, stunt, and legendary love stories, and the poetic and performance cultures of the *tawaif* (courtesan). Bhaumik alerts us to a dynamic set of interpenetrating media and popular cultural

7 Brian Larkin also analyses the new forms of video film production mounted on the infrastructure developed for piracy; see *Signal and Noise*. See also Birgit Meyer, “Religious Re-mediation: Pentacostal Views in Ghanaian Video Films”; and Mathias Krings, “Muslim Martyrs and Pagan Vampires: Popular Video Films and the Propagation of Religion in Northern Nigeria,” in *Postscripts: The Journal of Sacred Texts and Contemporary Worlds* 1, no. 2 (2006): 155–181, 183–205. For India, see Daljit Ami, “Celluloid and Compact Disks in Punjab,” 2006; Anil Pandey, “Desi Filmon Ka Karobar”; and Ranjan Yumnam, “Imphalwood: The Digital Revolution in Manipur,” both in Sarai Reader List, electronic bulletin board, www.sarai.net (accessed March 12, 2010). For summaries of Pandey and Yumnam’s work, see Debjani Sengupta and Vivek Narayan, eds., *Working Questions: The Sarai-CSDS Fellowship Programme 2002–2007* (Delhi: CSDS, 2007).

8 Kaushik Bhaumik, “The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1896–1936.” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2001).

productions for this new moment in cinema history, involving popular literary forms, the manufacturing of theatrical backdrops, film art direction, and the poetry and musical performance of the courtesan. These flowed into the mise-en-scène, musical forms, and narrative cultures of the cinema.

This making over of Bombay through the incorporation of new elements indicates the dispersed spectrum of materials assembled by the industry. I also want to suggest another line of dispersal. While Lahore in Punjab was to prove an important production center for this efflorescence of the north Indian region as production space and market, its “Islamicate” repertoire of musical performance cinema was part of a wider arc of film production and distribution beyond the subcontinent. Here, we can only gesture to the foreign markets for Indian film productions, as these traversed territories from North Africa and the Middle East through to Southeast Asia in the period before nation-state formation. As historians of empire have shown, imperial strategy and economic networks required the mobilization of workers, soldiers, sailors, and merchants, leading to major population flows that also paved the way for the movement of film commerce into new territories.⁹ Something other than a national history is clearly required in this itinerary. The Bombay industry also manufactured films for Iran, with Ardeshir Irani’s Imperial Studios, as well as Krishna Studios, making several films for the Iranian film entrepreneur Abdul Hossein Seponta.¹⁰

And, as William Van der Heide notes, starting with *Laila Majnu* in 1934, Indian businesses produced films in Malay. The film was made in Singapore, produced for the Motilal Chemical Company of Bombay by its owner K.R.S. Chisty, and directed by B. S. Rajhans, a Punjabi who had gained filmmaking expertise in India. Van der Heide points out that the choice of *Laila Majnu* derived from the musical and performance conventions of the local Bangsawan theater, a form similar to the Indian Parsi theater. The latter too highlighted the importance of a wider territorial arc of influence, as older Persian traditions of performance flowed into Bombay and were configured with writing for Urdu audiences and subsequently in Hindi.¹¹ Staple fare for all these theatrical traditions included legendary love stories such as Laila-Majnu and Shireen-Farhad, a narrative and performance culture that was widely shared.¹² These were also among the film subjects commissioned by the Iranian entrepreneur Seponta. This suggests the significance of a subject and form not so much for its association with contemporaneous subcontinental culture, but as an index of the sway held by Arabic/

9 See, for example, Thomas Metcalf, *Imperial Connections: India in the Indian Ocean, 1860–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

10 Massoud Mehrabi, “The History of Iranian Cinema, Part One,” www.massoudmehrabi.com (accessed March 12, 2010). See also “Ardeshir Irani” and “Imperial Talkies,” in *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, ed. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 108–109.

11 Somnath Gupta, *The Parsi Theatre: Its Origins and Development*, trans. Kathryn Hansen (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2005). For an understanding of how texts and performative cultures traveled, see Kathryn Hansen, “The *Indar Sabha* Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India (1853–1956),” in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, ed. Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 76–114.

12 Egyptian cinema also drew upon the Laila Majnu plot, as Viola Shafik points out in her *Arab Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

Persian/Urdu narratives and a musical performative cinema across a large territorial swathe. Clearly we have the outlines here of a historical trajectory that plots other forms of global vernacular, other interfaces with the global trends of modernization than those circulated by Hollywood.¹³

Conclusion. I have briefly outlined the way the film history of South Asia is defined by heterogeneous technologies and time frames, and by a spectrum of resources dispersed in space. The centrifuge of history nevertheless brings the cinema back in significant ways, warranting, I would maintain, a continued investment in film history. Cinema had a privileged place in the history of the twentieth century, providing through a host of formats critical indices of the magnified registers of time and event, human form and character, ideas of the mass and the intimate and of the political and the social. In this phase, cinema constituted a critical archive of modern history, although one which has still not been adequately mined or theorized for broader projects of historiography. My effort here has been to focus on something rather different. From the larger symbolic worlds generated for substantial publics in the twentieth century, cinema history now provides the ground to think about an apparatus, not in the older sense of an ideological process involving the constitution of subjects, but instead composed of the process of projection and audiovisual engagement as it is mobilized in a variety of contexts. The distributed effects of this more dispersed understanding of the cinema acquire further force as historical method is supplemented by other disciplinary engagements, taking us from the site of the screen into the body of practices and life stories that make screen cultures possible. Thus, through media anthropology and ethnography, there has been substantial engagement with practitioners and practices, involving stories about people, technology, techniques, locations, and studio environments, and so on. Life itself changes form, as cinema inflects the conditions of historical being, seeping through into the very textures of everyday practice.¹⁴ *

13 See Miriam Hansen's work on Hollywood as a global vernacular, and the emergence of other vernaculars as in the case of Shanghai. Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses" in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Edward Arnold, 2000), 332–350; and "Falling Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2000): 10–221. See also Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The new territories for transnational vernacular I have discussed here emerged after decolonization. See Dimitri Elefthoriotis, "A Cultural Colony of India: Indian Films in Greece in the 1950s and 1960s," *South Asian Popular Culture* 4, no. 2 (October 2006): 101–112; Ahmet Gürata, "The Road to Vagrancy: Translation and Reception of Indian Cinema in Turkey," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 1, no. 1 (2010): 67–90; the Tamil cinema of South India also had a wide territorial influence. See also Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (London: Palgrave, 2010), 201–212.

14 Debashree Mukherjee's "The Making of Johnny Johnny Yes Papa" provides an idea of how extensive field research and ethnographic diaries can reframe our understanding of the broader effects of filmmaking; <http://www.sarai.net/research/media-city/field-notes/film-city/jjyp/> (accessed February 12, 2010).

Film Historiography as Theory of the Film Subject: A Case Study

by VALENTINA VITALI

In a discussion about Japanese Studies, Harry Harootunian and Naoki Sakai observe that a theory cannot be the property of a national, ethnic, racial, or civilizational identity.¹ Unlike empirical knowledge, a theory does not divide people into those who know and those who do not, for it is a form of sociability that allows those who are willing to ask questions to relate to one another. A theory is always mediated by the time and the place of its formulation and uses, but, as a model of social functioning, it cannot be reduced to those markers. The historical specificity of film historiography would not, in itself, be a problem if those who practice it would always take the place and time from which they “do” history as the point of departure of their inquiry. The problem is that they rarely do, because embedded in the question “Where does film history speak from?” are questions of film theory that are still unresolved.

To “do” film history is more than to acquire a sense of where, over a period of five hundred years, the apparatus of cinema came from. The point of retracing how specific cinematic forms developed out of the apparatus’s encounter with preexisting cultural practices is, in the end, to understand how, exactly, films function as terrains in which the push and pull of history are played out. This question of how a “text” or film may relate to a historical “context” has been asked most directly in relation to notions of national cinema. *Pyasa* (Guru Dutt, 1957) and *El vampiro* (Fernando Mendez, 1957), for example, are different because *Pyasa* was made in India and *El vampiro* in Mexico. By far the majority of national cinemas’ historiographies, however, tend to relegate the “context” to a separate chapter, evoking, yes, history, but setting it aside as if it pertained to a sphere other than, or “outside,” the films examined. A film is always simultaneously a cluster of forms arranged according to cultural categories and a commodity that is produced and circulates within economic circuits. With cinema, these categories and circuits are always national and global at the same time. So, *Pyasa* and *Mother India* (Mehboob

1 Harry Harootunian and Naoki Sakai, “Dialogue: Japan Studies and Cultural Studies,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 593–647.

Khan, 1957, India) are different films, but less so than *Pyasa* and *El vampiro*, because *Pyasa* and *Mother India* were made in a geographical area that is not only governed by the same state policies, but which was also shaped by the same long-term dynamics. But it would be equally correct to argue that *Pyasa* and *Schlösser und Käten* (Kurt Maetzig, 1957, East Germany) are not as different as they might seem, given that both were shot using the same East German film stock. This is to say, although historiographies of national cinemas proceed on the basis that context indeed matters, the first obstacle to a critical understanding of the relation between a film and the time and place in which it was made is the model of history by which we tend to imagine context: a single, linear trajectory, the product of a seamless chain of events culminating with the consolidation of the coalition of interests that narrates the events in the first place. Among other things, this paradigmatic understanding leaves unaccounted for the capacity of the same time and place to produce films very different in kind. A more productive approach would involve thinking of “context” as a force field in which multiple and contradictory temporalities and forces operate simultaneously.

Why is *El vampiro* different from, say, *Los tigres del ring* (Chano Urueta, 1957, Mexico)? By the 1950s, state measures had enabled the Mexican film industry to reach its apex. The Ley de la Industria Cinematográfica (Film Industry Law, 1949) prohibited monopolies, but by 1952 a monopoly headed by U.S. magnate William Jenkins in association with, among others, Maximino Avila Camacho, brother of Mexico’s ex-president, controlled 80 percent of exhibition. Jenkins also succeeded in subjugating to his interests much of the production sector. *El vampiro* and *Los tigres del ring* were thus made during what historians have called “the prolonged structural crisis of Mexican cinema” (1955–1964). Film financing, production, and direction became increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few. Soon, the sons of established directors, such as René Cardona, Raúl de Anda, Miguel Zacarías, Valentín Gazcón, and Gregorio Walerstein, joined the industry as producers and directors. By the mid-1950s, the Mexican film industry had begun to revolve almost exclusively around a small number of family-based companies.²

One way to explore the dialectical relation between a context and the films it generates is to establish how the forces that make up such a context struggle to ascribe meaning to the forms available to the film. These forces change in different times and places, just as the functioning of (the same) forms in any one film does. Among such forces there are, to begin with, immediate industrial pressures. *El vampiro* and *Los tigres del ring* were produced at two different studios: the former at Clasa, the latter at Estudios América. Founded in 1935 with the state’s financial support, Clasa soon came to be regarded as the best in the country in terms of technical and professional facilities for film production. Because its facilities were expensive to rent, other studios were also able to remain in business.³ It soon became clear, however, that the measures taken by the state to improve the quality of production, distribution, and exhibition were failing. In June 1957, Clasa shut down. In September of the same year another studio, Tepeyac, also made its last film. As subsequent events revealed, their closures were due

2 Eduardo de la Vega Alfaro, “Origins, Development and Crisis of the Sound Cinema (1929–64),” in *Mexican Cinema*, ed. Paolo A. Paranaguá (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 91.

3 In 1951, Mexico City had a total of fifty-eight soundstages distributed among six studios.

to the intervention of interests connected with the Jenkins monopoly. Jenkins's production man, Gregorio Walerstein, and the actor Víctor Parra were put in charge of enlarging an old studio, Cuauhtémoc. Renamed Estudios América, it was staffed with workers from Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Industria Cinematográfica (STIC). As the union representing the workers in distribution and exhibition, STIC had sought for years to assert their legal right to participate in film production against the Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Producción Cinematográfica (STPC), the union representing actors, writers, directors, musicians, and technicians, that is to say, the more professionalized and more demanding sector of the film industry's labor market. When a compromise was reached allowing STIC to produce shorts only, Estudios América circumvented the restriction by dividing feature-length films into episodes. With no labor demands from STIC and its more accommodating membership, Estudios América produced its films on a shoestring.⁴

The results of this long struggle are written into the diegesis of *El vampiro* and *Los tigres del ring*. *Los tigres del ring* is a series of three episodes (followed by another three released a few months later) featuring masked wrestlers. It was made with minimal resources and as quickly as possible in order to exploit the popularity of wrestling matches which, once broadcast on television, had by then been banned from the networks.⁵ *Los tigres del ring* can thus also be read as, among other things, a fantasy about human energy and its ideal uses (or labor power) that is shaped by the priorities of William Jenkins and the broader interests of which he was a representative figure. An entirely different subject—a different set of interests—speaks through *El vampiro*. To begin with, this film was produced by ABSA, a small, independent company owned by actor and producer Abel Salazar that took as its model Universal Pictures in the 1930s, a company that, as Salazar saw it, “was quite small compared to others and the success of which was sustained by its monster and horror films, and those of Deanna Durbin. I had to make a horror film. In practice, with *El vampiro* I took Dracula and put him in a Mexican ‘hacienda.’”⁶ Five months after production had begun, the film was released at the Palacio Cine in Mexico City, where it played for four weeks. Ten years later, K. Gordon Murray released it on the US market under the same title, *The Vampire*. The result is a film that also inhabited the industrial context described above, though in a very different position than *Los tigres del ring*. *El vampiro* stages its own industrial location in the fabric of the text. If the choice of Dracula points to the subsumption of premodern, lineage-based forms of socialization into modernity, Dracula in a “hacienda” speaks volumes about the increasingly family-based nature of the Mexican film industry. In other words, this film too is shaped by the forces at work within the industry, but the perspective from which it stages them is not the same as that at work in *Los tigres del ring*.

This difference becomes glaringly evident if we also bring into the equation less immediate pressures. The crisis of Mexican cinema coincided with the governments

4 Tomás Pérez Turrent, “The Studios,” in *Mexican Cinema*, ed. Paolo A. Paranaguá (London: British Film Institute, 1995), 140–141.

5 See Heather Levi, *The World of Lucha Libre: Secrets, Revelations and Mexican National Identity in Lucha Libre* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

6 de la Vega Alfaro, *Fernando Mendez: 1908–1966* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1995), 109.

of Adolfo Ruiz Cortúnez (1952–1958) and Adolfo López Mateos (1958–1964). Both regimes were framed by the last period of the Mexican miracle: a strategy of combined political stability and economic development that in its first phase (1941–1945) depended on a pact with the United States: in exchange for military cooperation, inexpensive labor, and guaranteed sales of raw materials, Mexico received loans and technological aid to invigorate its economy and reposition itself in the Latin American, European, and even US markets. This was translated into a process of accelerated industrialization which changed the face of the nation substantially. A predominantly agricultural economy was transformed into a manufacturing one, and an agrarian society began to make the qualitative leap into a typically urban one.⁷ But for all of that, the census of 1960 suggests that Mexico's upper class remained very small, even if its location shifted from the countryside to the city and traditional "hacendados" gave way to bankers and industrialists. While the middle class comprised no more than 17 percent of the total, by far the majority of the population (82 percent) was constituted by manual laborers.⁸ Although this was a highly unionized class, Mexican stability depended on an equilibrium among constituent groups which, in turn, led political legitimacy to rest on the acceptance and participation of each sector and its leaders, not of individuals. The balance of forces was thus sustained by the populist distribution of material rewards, appeals to the interests of a revolutionary "people," and increasing reliance on the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party) as the sole entity of national coherence, rather than by the emergence of a civil society—a sphere of negotiation between individuals that was not to play a visible role in Mexican society until the earthquake of September 19, 1985, when it was blatantly demonstrated that the state had let down the inhabitants of Mexico City.⁹

The reconceptualization of "context" as a force field within which historically specific, contradictory forces are at work enables us to examine a film as an unstable object, the forms of which are contended over by such forces. Far from being "outside," these forces are the very determinants which orchestrate the functioning of the film's forms as they struggle to ascribe them semantic value. The analysis of a film's modes of address remains the best way to examine those movements, provided that the textual analysis is informed by knowledge of the historically specific forces at work in the film. To return to *Los tigres del ring*, we find, for instance, the narrative combination of industrial technology and physical energy and the recurring collective mode of address—features that *Los tigres del ring* shares with other wrestling films. These features were not simply results of the fact that these films were often shot during actual wrestling bouts¹⁰ and that, as such, they were in effect applications of industrial technology to strenuous physical performance. Above all, that combination staged a broader

7 Vega Alfaro, "Origins," 85.

8 Peter H. Smith, "Mexico Since 1946: Dynamics of an Authoritarian Regime," in *Mexico Since Independence*, ed. Lesley Bethell (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 323–337.

9 Dan La Botz, *Democracy in Mexico: Peasant Rebellion and Political Reform* (Boston: South End Press, 1995), 65–70.

10 Because footage of the live wrestling bout would be used to make the film, the camera, barred from the ring during the bout, could and did convey only the audience's point of view, never the wrestlers' or the referee's subjective perspectives.

contemporary consideration: industrialization and the creation of a labor force. As the *mise-en-scène* of *Los tigres del ring* (and many other wrestling films) shows, this is an ideal labor force, in the sense that in Mexico, in the 1950s, it responded to a sectoral, collective address. Significantly, in the wrestling films of “el Enmascarado de Plata,” Santo, the wrestler, acts on behalf of and as the representative of “the people.”

In contrast to *Los tigres del ring*, *El vampiro* stages, from the beginning, a subjective, individuated look. The film’s first image, in the title sequence, is a high-angle shot of a “hacienda” courtyard at night. Standing with his back to the camera is a man wearing a black cape. The following shot shows the same figure in the same position, the camera now at eye level. The third shot is an extreme close-up of the man’s eyes, followed by what he sees: an open window. Cut to that interior: a woman paces about her bedroom looking worried, facing toward the window. The following cuts—back again to an extreme close-up of the man’s eyes, then to the room as the woman moves toward her bed, and back again to the man’s eyes—indicate that it is still the man who is seeing. This staging allocates narration to (and forces us to identify with) him. Finally, we are given a closer, outside view of the window which introduces a dramatic reverse shot. As if from the window, we look into the courtyard: the man lifts his arms, his cape opens, and, as we cut to his back again, the man has turned into a bat, which now flies into the bedroom. In the next shot, the camera is inside the bedroom: as the woman looks at the window and starts screaming, the whole frame gradually becomes covered by the black cape of the vampire as he appears to the left from behind the camera, as if through the window. He approaches the bed, bites the woman, and eventually exits the frame to the left, revealing his victim unconscious on the bed. As the camera tracks in to a closer view of her bitten neck, the last title appears.

Throughout this film Count Duval—a foreigner, a vampire, and the representative of a premodern order that, lineage based, does not recognize individuated subjectivity—is the only figure to be allocated a subjective point of view.¹¹ This raises a series of questions: Why should it be this figure who, in this film, provides the spectator’s point of entry into a well-known story?¹² Why is Duval allowed to survive in modern Mexico and to be ascribed a subjective look that, anachronistically, does not appear to recognize the boundary between private and public space? Why is this subjectivity pitted against the heir of the lord of the mansion, who is also a woman? And finally, why, in 1968, was this film deemed suitable for sectors of the US market? The forms of *El vampiro* have no meaning in themselves. They can only be made sense of in their contradictions if the temporalities and conflicting blocs constitutive of 1950s Mexico, including those determining its relation to the outside, are drawn into the analysis. For it is the tension between those interests that made it so that from the start we are given little choice but to identify with a premodern, rapacious figure, even if *El vampiro*, considered as a whole, would have us side instead with Abel Salazar, the film’s producer and the interpreter of the amiable doctor who, in the end, kills Duval.

11 When the vampire flies through the window into the bedroom, the screen, now covered by the vampire’s cape, goes black. The point of view thus conveyed is neutral, the narrator’s, as he prepares to allocate narration to the vampire again. In other words, the black screen here signals a shift from a neutral (or objective) point of view to a subjective one.

12 It is worth comparing this film with *Dracula* (Terence Fisher, 1958, UK), in which points of view are allocated according to a very different logic.

Seen from this perspective, the issue at hand cannot be reduced to the geographical or historical markers of the history we practice. Any film history project is always much more than its markers. One of the dangers—in reducing it to just that—is that while we question the universal applicability of so marked a film historiographic or theoretical frame, we accept the models of history and of culture that underpin it. In other words, the problem is not so much that film historiography and theory were developed and formulated on the basis of the production and study of North American and European films. The problem, rather, is that our understanding of what these cinemas “do” is still informed by discourses that were central to nineteenth-century European and North American culture, including a historicist (even evolutionist) understanding of historical change and a notion of art as a sphere separate from the everyday. The conceptualization of a national formation as homogeneous and the idea that texts and contexts are discrete spheres (though they may “reflect” each other) are corollaries of those historically specific models of history and of culture. What is suggested here, instead, is a line of inquiry that builds on historical materialism’s reconceptualization of history and on the historical avant-garde’s challenge to the bourgeois separation of art from everyday life.¹³ For no one doubts the centrality of North American cinema or of North American and European academia. There is even widespread consensus that this causes difficulties when we come to discuss cinemas produced and circulated elsewhere. Few, on the other hand, raise the question of what follows from that, namely, that if the historiography we use is useless in grasping the operation of these other cinemas, what guarantee do we have that it can be of any use in understanding North American and European cinemas in the first place? Whatever historians focus upon, whatever the markers of their history, their approach must surely be able to do more than simply account for a national cinema. But to begin to grasp what cinema does—what cinema is—more fundamental questions than the historian’s markers must be asked: Which models are most apt to grasp the short-, medium-, and long-term dynamics that shape cultural practices in diverse historical constellations? Which forms has cultural industrialization taken in these areas? Which forms does modernization take, understood in terms of the emergence of a public sphere? How do diverse societies differentiate between identity, a function of the public sphere, and subjectivity? And, finally, how are subjectivities—understood as the unstable effects of contradictory discourses—affected through historically specific discursive or narrative models? It is by revisiting these questions that film history and theory may, one day, become capable of grasping how, exactly, a film may shape historical change . . . and how this, in turn, will mark the writing of its history. *

13 The classic texts here are, of course, Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (“Über den begriff der geschichte” [1940]), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Collins, 1973), 255–256; and Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (*Theorie der avantgarde* [1974]), trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Going South: On Documentary as a Form of Cognitive Geography

by MICHAEL CHANAN

Our comprehension of the kind of world we live in is conditioned by many factors, including our knowledges of other places and our geographical vocabularies—the schemes we employ to identify location near and far, at local, regional, and further levels beyond. The twentieth century transformed our knowledge of other places and has given us new but confusing and contradictory vocabularies and concepts. For one thing, we travel more and further. We should not idealize this. Travel expands our horizons, but we always carry the baggage of our subjectivity with us and often fail to see what we don't want to see. Nor should we forget that travel is undertaken for different purposes: tourism, business, pilgrimage, migration, exile . . . and making documentaries. Each implies a different perspective, partly because each implies a different relationship to both the destination and to the place called home. We also know more of other places because we see many more of them on our screens than ever before. Indeed, this is where cinema began, at the very moment of its inception in the 1890s, when the Lumière brothers set the pattern by sending their agents around the world, not only to introduce their invention in practically every major city of the day, but also to bring back “exotic” imagery to tantalize their rapidly growing audiences back home. Television followed and extended cinema in picturing the four corners of the world, a process which accelerated in the mid-1960s with the introduction of satellite communications, allowing for the global transmission of television signals. Instantaneity is also the *modus operandi* of the development and global spread of the Internet over the last twenty years. At each of these stages, the screen as a representational space undergoes a subtle transformation, as the process of symbolic coding is remediated. Conceptually, we are entering the territory—not an accidental metaphor—of what is called cognitive mapping: the construction of mental maps which encode the relative relationships between different locations in the spatial environment. A term introduced in the late 1940s by the behavioral psychologist Edward Tolman, and then taken up in disciplines like geography,

archeology, architecture, and urban planning,¹ forty years later it acquires another dimension in the hands of the cultural theorist Fredric Jameson, who speaks of it as a process whereby individual subjects situate themselves within the wider and unrepresentable totality. Cognitive mapping thereby possesses a crucial ideological component, because it involves (following Althusser and Lacan) the representation of the subject's Imaginary relationship to their Real conditions of existence.² Documentary cinema in this light is a representational space which is loosely structured by three levels of inscription: the ostensive content of the image on the screen, the implied relationships produced by montage (the "language" of cinema), and the implicit but hidden categories of the ideological.

What does this mean for the study of documentary cinema beyond the metropolitan center? While the basic outlines of the history of documentary are well enough established, most accounts nonetheless give a very incomplete and unbalanced view of it, because they commit a sin of omission: they do not escape what Edward Said called the imaginary geography with which the West sees the East, subjective visions in which the gaze is asymmetrical because it only goes one way.³ In other words, they tend to think in terms of documentary as a form which not only originates in the metropolis (which is true enough) but whose development is essentially a question of extending the outward gaze. They fail to ask about the return of the gaze, or rather, what happens when those who have been distant subjects of the occidental camera take up the camera themselves and turn it on their own Real conditions of existence.

This imbalance can even be seen in the case of crucial moments in the development of documentary back in the metropolis. Take the decisive turn at the end of the 1950s, when a new generation of portable film gear appeared, and it finally became possible to film almost anywhere with synchronous sound, handheld cameras, and even without lights. The result, in the felicitous phrase of Mario Ruspoli, one of the new breed of filmmakers who first filmed this way, was that for the first time "sound and picture stroll along arm-in-arm with the characters in motion."⁴ The standard English-language version of this moment pinpoints key films and filmmakers without seeing the wider picture. In Paris there was *cinéma vérité* and Jean Rouch; in New York, where the preferred term was direct cinema, there was Robert Drew and his associates. Some of these accounts explain the differences, some conflate them, but rarely do they pay attention to the contemporaneous pioneering work of the French Canadians, even though they made some of the finest films in the history of documentary. Perhaps it's because these films belonged to Quebec's "quiet revolution," when a national linguistic minority under Anglo-Saxon hegemony asserted its cultural and political identity; in other words, this was an attempt by a marginalized group to turn the gaze in another direction, which escaped and upset the imaginary geography of the center. It's not entirely surprising that orthodox film history marginalized documentary, because most documentary films never circulated abroad, or only did so within the restricted sphere

1 Edward Tolman, "Cognitive Maps in Rats and Men," *Psychological Review* 55 (1948): 189–208.

2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

3 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 54.

4 Mario Ruspoli, in Michael Chanan, *The Politics of Documentary* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 166.

of film festivals, the art film circuit, or political movements, and a myth took root that documentary was essentially a local affair and didn't travel well. What is missing from the frame as a result, however, is the steady postwar expansion of documentary cinema beyond the metropolitan centers of film culture in the West. There is little knowledge in the English-speaking world, for instance, of documentary in either Eastern Europe or Japan, or of the example I pursue here, the appearance of a new radical continent-wide documentary movement in Latin America, a key element in the movement known as *nuevo cine latinoamericano* (New Latin American Cinema).

In front of the audiences to whom they were directly addressed, these films encouraged a new sense of their place in the world, undercutting the discourse of the political classes and the conventional wisdom of the mass media. Almost inevitably, they escape the distorted imagery of the dominant cinema's imaginary, simply by rendering visible the previously unseen, overlooked, and excluded. In the process, the filmmakers discover that the exotic isn't other and somewhere else but on their own doorstep, and not at all exotic but full of teeming humanity, impoverished and deprived. By bringing out this subject matter, these films put on display for the first time the underbelly of modern society, the inequality and oppression which make up what the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha called the everyday violence of an economic system that makes vast numbers go hungry.⁵ In this way, negating the negation of the exotic, documentary becomes a form of negotiation of modernity, of which the practice of documentary is itself an instance. Self-consciously turning the camera on the Real conditions of existence, where it everywhere perceives the signs of unequal development, it becomes a discourse on modernization as the promise of a future impossible ever to reach, modernization as a process so riddled with contradictions basically economic in origin that it negates its own potentialities. The emblematic film here is doubtless *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*) from Argentina, a mammoth three-part, four-hour documentary of 1968 by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, the authors of a famous manifesto of militant cinema, "Hacia un tercer cine" (Toward a Third Cinema). Revolutionary in its politics (a product of the left wing of the Peronist movement, which drew inspiration from Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution), experimental in form and filmic language (a rich and volatile montage of images counterposing an analytical commentary, interspersed by reportage, interviews, intertitles, voices, and music), Part One of *La hora de los hornos*, "Neocolonialism and Violence," advances an analysis of the conditions of everyday violence which permeate the neocolonial state, with chapters (among others) on daily violence, the oligarchy, the system, political violence, cultural violence, dependency, and ideological war. Part Two, "Act of Liberation," provides a chronicle of Peronism until the military coup of 1955, and the resistance which followed; Part Three, "Violence and Liberation," takes up the analysis of resistance and revolutionary praxis.

La hora de los hornos was first seen abroad at the Pesaro Film Festival in Italy in 1968, where it took the Critics Award, making the film an emblem of a political moment of worldwide revolutionary fervor in which differences between North and South were

5 Glauber Rocha, "The Aesthetics of Violence," in *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael Chanan (London: British Film Institute, 1983), 13–14.

both recognized and submerged in a sea of youthful protest and colorful celebration—hence the eager reception of new wave Latin American documentaries among the militant left in the First World, as we then called it, back in the 1960s and 1970s. Introduced into Europe at film festivals like Pesaro and Leipzig, the new wave documentaries began to gain small-scale distribution through alternative distributors. The first function served by these films was to fill a void of information about Latin American struggles in the mainstream media in order to mobilize and animate support. A few of the feature films were shown in art houses and very occasionally seen on television, but the documentaries were mostly unknown beyond the movement, the people who saw them at meetings and teach-ins, where they fed the awakening of the postwar generations to a comprehension of Third World realities. This history has been forgotten, because film culture at the center is not only—paradoxically—parochial but also hugely amnesiac, especially since most of the films fell out of distribution, the copies were not replaced, and they haven't been digitally recovered. We might try to recover this history by returning to the radical film journals of the day, and of course the catalogues of the alternative distributors (like *The Other Cinema* in London), but there is an aporia in what can be gleaned from these accounts and sources, which inevitably fail to report on the puzzlement and bewilderment which the films often evoked in the moment of reception in the First World milieu, in large part because they were automatically classified as a cinema of underdevelopment and judged accordingly: as if the imperfect image, poor sound, and sometimes elliptical narration acted as a metaphor for what they showed. But as Jameson would later observe, if technical perfection connotes advanced capitalism, then “imperfect cinema,” as the Cuban filmmaker Julio García Espinosa called it, signified not merely underdevelopment but a knowing kinship with the contemporaneous practices of First World oppositional filmmakers (like Jean-Luc Godard), with their handheld cameras, deliberately sloppy editing, and ostentatious valorization of amateurishness in place of Hollywood sheen.⁶ It therefore simply cannot be said that Latin American cinema was underdeveloped in the sense of being “behind,” which was what was frequently assumed. In any case, the result was a disparity between address and reception, arising from the different spaces of viewing. Beyond the question of style, a film would often assume cultural and political knowledge not possessed by the First World viewer; conversely, the First World viewer, locked into the imaginary geography of the metropolis, would give it certain preferred readings based on assumptions and lack of knowledge. But this only points to a deeper misrecognition, a kind of unequal symbolic exchange, like the unequal terms of trade between First and Third Worlds, in which aesthetic, political, and theoretical values are often confused and misconstrued.

By way of example, I recall two screenings of a Brazilian documentary, *Ate a ultima gota* (*To the Last Drop*) by Sergio Rezende, two weeks apart in 1980, the first in London and the second in Havana, and the contrast in the film's reception in the two places which surfaced in the ensuing discussions. The film portrays—without rhetoric, as I recall, since this is not a militant film but a piece of social investigation—the fate of an unemployed man who resorts, in those days before AIDS, to selling his blood on a

6 Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (London: Routledge, 1992), 218–219.

regular basis, contributing to the 3 million liters of blood then exported annually from Latin America, mostly to the United States. In London, people tended to be suspicious of the film's emotivity and wanted more analysis of the metaphor which the film implied but never stated as such, that economic imperialism literally sucks the blood of those it enslaves. In Havana it was praised as an example of a powerful film which everyone, literate and illiterate, could understand. A couple of years later, I had a similar experience with *Missing* (1982), the Costa-Gavras film of the Chilean coup, but the other way round. I saw it a few days after it opened in a first-run house in Bogotá, midweek in the late afternoon. The cinema was packed, the audience was gripped and attentive to the smallest detail, and at the end they gave it a standing ovation of several minutes. Back in London, I found that several friends and some of the reviews were lukewarm—because they said it was too emotional. Two questions arise. First, how can we explain this kind of disparity? Perhaps we might consider the idea that different kinds of emotional intelligence are at work in different audiences—but I leave this for another occasion. Second, speaking from the North, how can we escape from such external otherness, especially when it's repeated every day in the big media? The multiplication of big media has not brought the Real conditions of existence of the multitudes in the South any closer, even if some of these realities—generally the most graphic and therefore conventionally newsworthy—are nowadays widely reported. But almost all this reportage continues to be produced by the major international broadcasters. Very little of it originates from the country under investigation. In the past, this often meant that even major upheavals in remote and inaccessible places around the globe would go underreported. Nowadays, the spread of digital communications means that when foreign correspondents are kept out, it is the locals, in places like Burma and Iran, who use their mobile phones to supply the world with news, photos, and videos of what is happening. But these are extreme situations and provide only a glimpse of what might result from the convergence of different media. Meanwhile, the dominant perspective on the otherness of the wider world remains external, and mostly emptied of local political context precisely because it is designated as the perspective of the outsider. And even if reporters are honest and ethical and conscientious, they're still constrained by the blinkered purview of the media industry's editorial gatekeepers. These people are not prone to critical reflection, and the problem for those who are is exclusion from the wider public debate, the public sphere which has the paradoxical quality, as Judith Butler recently observed, of being "constituted in part by what cannot be said or what cannot be shown."⁷ To follow Butler, it seems that big media's representations efface what is most human about the Other, and this will remain so until the media acknowledge their own mediation; and viewers remain outside the representation until they recognize that we are all implicated in lives that are not our own—in short, until everyone begins to listen to what he or she is unable to hear. One can only add that if these notions seem impossibly utopian, then, as Brecht said about the suppressed potential of radio, we should consider why they're utopian.⁸

7 Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), xvii.

8 Bertolt Brecht, "The Radio as a Communications Apparatus" [1932], in *Brecht on Film and Radio*, ed. Marc Silberman (London: Methuen, 2000), 43.

What critical methods would illuminate a cognitive geography that responded to different coordinates (different, not opposite)? Can we, emerging from endless hours in the archives viewing neglected films and having mined information from documents and informants, perhaps achieve a small utopia and shift our perspective? Perhaps—if producing critical history means, first and foremost, being critical of the dominant historiography, which reads from North to South as if it were top down. But the question also returns us to where I started: our comprehension of the kind of world we live in is conditioned by many factors, including our knowledge of other places and our geographical vocabularies. These are dynamic forces, not static categories, and they’ve shifted with the globalization of the past quarter century. Documentary is part of this process and cannot be understood as a form of discourse without this larger framework. What is needed is a paradigm shift, an epistemological break, so to speak, that recovers the dialogical nature of the gaze, in which the camera is an actor and reality is the coauthor (as José Carlos Avellar recently put it).⁹ There is no ready formula or recipe for this paradigm shift. In fact, it is born in the act of viewing itself, in the special moments when the passive spectator becomes an active viewer, filled with empathy for the ghostly figures on the screen, hearing the question the boys throw back at Eduardo Coutinho in the opening scene of *Boca de lixo* (1993), “What do you get outta this . . . holding this thing in our faces?” (Figure 1). Or to put it another way, “What are you

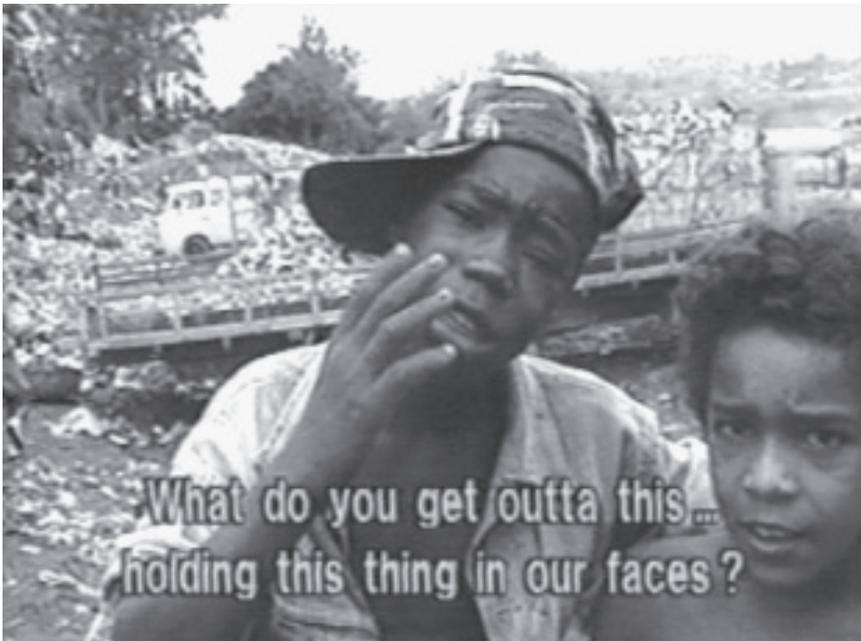


Figure 1. The passive spectator becomes an active viewer, hearing the question, “What do you get outta this . . . holding this thing in our faces?” in Eduardo Coutinho’s *Boca de lixo* (Centro de Criação de Imagem Popular, 1993).

9 José Carlos Avellar, “Camera Lucida.” Paper presented at the Reality Effects: Poetics of Locality, Memory, and the Body in Contemporary Argentine and Brazilian Cinema Conference, London, November 26–28, 2009.

going to do for us?” In short, the issue is not strictly a scholarly one, but political—or rather, it arises precisely at the interface between scholarship and politics, and in the challenge to the idea of the disinterested intellectual enshrined in the traditional idea of the university.

But times have changed. With the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the unimpeded hegemony of neoliberalism, and the digital revolution, practically every parameter in the scenario of documentary has shifted. The rise of video, computers, and the Internet has transformed the means of production and of dissemination, which have both by stages become cheaper, more accessible, and more democratic—although always unequally distributed. The result of these shifts is that the virtual as well as the cognitive geography of documentary has been remodeled, with effects both synchronic and diachronic. History itself looks different as a result, as the archive reappears in new guises.

Meanwhile, the computer screen and Internet connection obliterate distances even more effectively than television—you just have to click another hyperlink, and without going anywhere, you’re instantly somewhere else: not just a metaphor, but the virtual instantiation of globalization. None of this, however, provides a solution; what it does is create a parallel public sphere which repeats and multiplies the same disparities and contradictions. It is possible in the North to stream videos long and short from the South onto our desktops, yet major documentaries circulating in a growing number of small documentary festivals never reach either our cinema or television screens. In any case, globalization pulls in divergent directions. Borders are said to be obstacles no longer, and global interconnections are strengthened and reinforced, yet, in response, local communities and allegiances are also strengthened and reinforced. This, however, is precisely the terrain of documentary, which in going out to encounter the Real conditions of existence is always situated within the local, even when it thinks globally. The films of the earlier period have fallen out of circulation, almost as much in Latin America as elsewhere, and the history they represent and express has receded (but not disappeared). Nevertheless, the problematics of representation remain essentially the same, and the only resolution lies in the fact that documentary is continually reinventing itself. As I bring these notes to a close, an e-mail arrives which makes the point much better than I can. A correspondent in Uruguay has sent me a document called the Declaration of Guayaquil, the outcome of a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean documentarists in Ecuador, attended by over one hundred participants from nineteen countries. An eloquent and lucid manifesto for our times, the document testifies to a strong and positive link to the historical moment of *nuevo cine latinoamericano*. Indeed, the document argues for the continuity of historical memory. There are at least, it says, four substantial issues to confront in pursuit of the kind of documentary that properly reflects what they call “Our America”:

To recover the value of memory as a live and dynamic legacy enabling us to move forward. To grant a vital space to all who work for transformation within our pluriculturalism. To give meaning to the struggles taking place against key hegemonic imaginaries which manipulate and negate the essential qualities of our realities. And last, to strengthen the cultural heritage of our

peoples that different forms of power today threaten to make invisible. We therefore value the documentary as a form of building identities, of historical memory, and as a helper in building active communities at every level.¹⁰

These in fact, it seems to me, are the same imperatives that we need in order to recover and construct the history of documentary practices beyond the heartlands of the occident. *

10 Declaration of Guayaquil (Declaración de Guayaquil). Segundo Encuentro de Documentalistas Latinoamericanos y del Caribe, October 2009.

Film and Digital Video as Testimony of Chinese Modernity: Trauma, History, and Writing

by ESTHER C. M. YAU

By visualizing atrocities of the twentieth century, film claims a place in the public consciousness of history by recording, re-envisioning, and investigating the past.¹ For some, a cinema of traumas is an indisputable testament to the violence and the ruins of modernity's dreamworlds.² On celluloid or as digital signals, moving images have recorded gruesome and shocking details of injury in the name of progress, revolution, and purification. They show political movements' frenzied faces, portray modern weaponry's destructive impact on human bodies, and exhibit experiences of pain. Footage taken by amateurs has revealed some of the most damaging acts in the midst of war and disorder, while certain historical films, though regarded by historians as inaccurate, provoke somber questions of

1 As the result of sponsorship of Holocaust memory projects by museums and schools, there are ongoing discussions of the moving image's roles as witness, propaganda, oral history, family history, documentary, and legacy. See, for example, Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman, eds., *Holocaust and the Moving Image: Representations in Film and Television Since 1933* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005). See also "Lanzmann's Shoah: 'Here There Is No Why,'" in Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 95–138.

2 Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworlds and Catastrophe: The Passing of Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

justice and moral authority in a world of vast uncertainties.³ Collective memory that is strengthened by moving image testimonials, when channeled back into a sense of history as optimal progress, often reveals subtle or explicit nationalist sentiments and even sexist self-glorification, especially in such places as war museums and shrines.⁴ Manipulations of the images' stark revelations supporting retreat into reactionary identity formations are not uncommon, and state memory institutions regularly use historical documentaries and feature films alongside material objects to manufacture the desired memories. Dueling claims made on the basis of collective memory and historical consciousness raise questions of ethics, in the afterlife of testimonials bearing witness to atrocities.

Portrayals of collective trauma, rising from the same context that bred aggressive power and fueled cruelty in the first place, are not immune from sadistic entanglement with a poetics of cruelty and violence. When viewed from a technologically mediated distance, they feed a morbid voyeurism for de-realized spectacles of brutality in which destructive consequences that hurt become engrossing.⁵ Modern media has trained US eyes to differentiate various forms of destruction and dying that incite fascination and instill indifference—though such indifference does not in itself exclude the surge of hostility among ideological opponents.⁶ Mediated scenes of destruction have great rhetorical force, often evoking what one might call “ideological pleasure,” or the pleasure of being on the right side of destructive power as the result of being in allegiance with the ideology or worldview endorsed by the media.

Death equalizes. Catastrophes do not discriminate. Over time, however, memories of atrocities of the last century have been equalized, and the names of national leaders—Hitler, Stalin, and Mao—invoke ideologies, cult worship, and political suppression, which in turn has led to both silencing and dissent. These political explanations are not to be taken as the whole story, to say the least. The scope, scale, and intensity of the “holocaustal events” of the twentieth century, Hayden White argues, have challenged the established methods of nineteenth-century humanistic historiography. Today, there can be no attribution to human “agents” who are in full and conscious view of the causes, effects, and moral implications of such events; any expectation of representational objectivity must be set aside as well.⁷ The failure of humanist historiography for White means abandoning realist storytelling techniques and seeking literary modernism to express modernist events in which beginnings and

3 See Marcia Landy, ed., *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

4 Jemima Repo discusses the memorial rituals that worship militaristic masculinity in “A Feminist Reading of Gender and National Memory at the Yasukuni Shrine,” *Japan Forum* 20, no. 2 (July 2008): 219–243.

5 The distance can be spatial, temporal, or both. Kevin Robins discusses the vast deployment of Western vision technologies that insulate soldiers and viewers from the distanced acts of killing in battles that make “elusive euphoria of a high-tech war.” He nevertheless concedes that even distanced images might eventually provide access to a gruesome reality. Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (London: Routledge, 1996), 63–72.

6 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

7 Hayden White's “holocaustal” events of the twentieth century include the World Wars, the Great Depression, unimaginable poverty and hunger among the world's population, environmental pollution, and genocide by scientific technology. White, “The Modernist Event,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17–38.

endings, inside and outside, or events and their remembrance do not have distinct boundaries and forms. The impulse of modernist writing to “de-fetishiz[e] both events and the fantasy accounts of them”⁸ has remained one predilection among others in the search for adequate and ethical representations of carnage, especially those occurring in the cold war era. Other modes (realist, epic, ironic, melodramatic, surrealistic, horrific) continue to be taken up to make sense of the multiple symbolic orders entailed in national traumas, not to mention filmmakers’ attentiveness to the uncanny remains of trauma and their emotional impact on those who have suffered.⁹ Writing about catastrophes in the somber age of the “after” does not equalize, and narrative and anti-narrative modes are taken up by postcolonial writers and filmmakers to engage the modernist events that take place in the world. To invoke Theodor Adorno’s observation here: “[A] perennial suffering has just as much right to find expression as a victim of torture has to scream. For this reason it may have been wrong to write that after Auschwitz no poetry could be written.”¹⁰ Realistic pretensions and fetishistic accounts aside, moving image testimonies continue to be called for after Auschwitz, after Nanking, after Cambodia, after Rwanda, after 9/11, after the 5/12 earthquake in Sichuan, after Haiti, and after . . . yesterday. The very need to name each atrocity is the need for testimony to do justice to the experience and the memories of pain, and not only for the survivors.

Competing Memories in Altered Landscapes. There exists a small corpus of Chinese-language films that consciously bear witness to the human disasters and psychological trauma of the modern nation-building experience. They perform memory work on behalf of ordinary people blown over by the storm of history and, in this respect, counteract the romance of empire and power. The absurd turns of human fear and murderous violence in Jiang Wen’s *Devils at the Doorstep* (*Guizi lai le* [2000]), for instance, stand in stark contrast to the glittering and stylized imperial trauma of Zhang Yimou’s *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Man cheng jin dai huang jin jia* [2005]). A number of these films feature multiple protagonists in the stories woven around historical events that have shattered youthful lives: *A City of Sadness* (*Bei qing cheng shi* [Hou Hsiao-hsien, 1989]) for Taiwan’s February 28 Incident; *The Blue Kite* (*Lan feng zheng* [Tian Zhuang-zhuang, 1993]) for the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) political movements that culminated in the Cultural Revolution; *The Longest Summer* (*Hui nin yin fu dak bit doh* [Fruit Chan, 1998]) about the anticipated disaster of Hong Kong’s handover; and *Summer Palace* (*Yi he yuan* [Lou Ye, 2006]) for the June 4th crackdown. The dialectical sights and sounds found in some lesser-known titles (such as Ann Hui’s *Ordinary Heroes* [*Qian yan wan yu*; 1999] and to some extent Shu-shuen Tang’s *China Behind* [*Zai jian*

8 Ibid., 32.

9 Thomas Elsaesser argues against the modernist dismissal of affectivity by attending to the “libidinally charged play of identifications” in the film experience. Elsaesser, “Subject Positions, Speaking Positions: From *Holocaust*, *Our Hitler*, and *Heimat* to *Shoah* and *Schindler’s List*,” in Sobchack, ed., *Persistence of History*, 147–150.

10 Theodor Adorno, *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), xvi.

Zhongguo, 1974]) work like seeds of memory planted in the deserts of forgetting, and they do so amid a flourishing memory industry that has sprung up since the 1990s with prints of old photographs, memoirs, secret histories, and melodramas to mine names and incidents of the past.

More than thirty years after the Cultural Revolution, there is no lack of films about this atrocity, even though only a handful provoke a sense of mourning.¹¹ Recent Chinese television historical dramas, oral history programs, and soap operas have made the mnemonic narratives of suffering completed in the early 1980s appear simple, plain, and moralistic by comparison. In one TV drama series after another, romance, betrayal, and everyday justice take center stage, while the Cultural Revolution atrocity moves into an obscure background and often becomes a reference without an image in the grand official story of the Revolution.

Contentious narratives do exist, and occasionally they are disturbing, not because of the poignancy of the testimonial, but because their attention-catching male narcissism and sexual prowess steal center stage from the otherwise languishing stories of trauma—as exemplified in Jiang Wen’s *In the Heat of the Sun* (*Yangguang canlan de rizi* [1994]) and *The Sun Still Rises* (*Tai yang zhao chang sheng qi* [2007]). Thus, they announce the bankruptcy of the testimonials of suffering in Cultural Revolution films. As resources and cultural capital abound in what seems to be China’s time of prosperity, the writing of a trauma that has long-lasting consequences languishes rather than gaining new ground.

Without question, a sharp rise in materialism as well as a vast spatial transformation in China have impacted collective memory. Ceaseless modernization and urban development since 1992 have created many zones of overdevelopment, while old neighborhoods have disappeared. The suburbs of Beijing and Shanghai have gone through an extended building boom of luxurious estate homes, and small towns have converted their designs to offer many tourist joints. The material culture exhibited in the zones of new development arguably can be seen as a form of “screen memories” in the sense that the nameless international building styles of shopping complexes as cool utopias block out the associating memories anyone may have of Mao-era austerity, political-struggle movements, and work-driven community which once existed in the same area. New signs of wealth point to a growing middle-class mainstream from which Chinese media now draw their income and popular support. By the mid-2000s, the advertising and real estate industries and television had shaped desires for prosperity and personal happiness into a (consumerist) status quo. The ruling regime and its media apparatuses, stepping up to the demands of global exposure, now utilize digital technology widely and assimilate most of the talent trained by the state universities, including those of the Beijing Film Academy, into a nationalistic consumerist mainstream. In addition to stimulating a multimillion-dollar advertising industry,¹²

11 See Chris Berry, *Postsocialist Cinema in Post-Mao China: The Cultural Revolution After the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

12 See Jing Wang, *Brand New China: Advertising, Media, and Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

television has become the largest media employer, recruiting writers, producers, directors, and artists for the expanded channels of both Chinese Central Television (CCTV) in Beijing and local stations.¹³ The visible new suburban homes and the odd preference for European-themed country estates and landmarks in competing provinces register the intense concentration of resources that manifest the changing direction of popular consciousness. There is a prosperous future for which everyone must work and compete rigorously. A different kind of storm is raging, and memories of the past, like the semi-abandoned fields and old houses separated from the altered landscapes of the present, are unlikely to be standing for long as high-rises and mansions shoot up nearby. From among members of the vanishing generations, oral history programs in CCTV salvage firsthand accounts for selective assimilation into the general-interest histories that have become a kind of public consolation when so many spatial references have vanished.¹⁴

Radical unevenness in China bespeaks dynamic flows and challenges established notions of “first” and “third” worlds in at least two ways. First, the mutual embedding and entwining of apparent opposites does not leave the worlds entirely separate from each other. Appadurai has formulated the concept of “disjunctures” to register the stark contrast and proximity resulting from uneven global flows of resources. This demonstrates that the hypothetical integrity of any separate “world,” as in the Three Worlds theory, is no longer viable. Chinese examples to illustrate this abound, one of which is the typical provincial party secretary or local propaganda official turned investment director who handles transnational corporate investment deals in luxury hotels through teleconferencing. Another example is low-end mobile phone sales aimed at peasants living in the remote countryside, a phenomenon that reveals not only marketing strategies but also changing conceptualizations of space-time compression.¹⁵ Second, moving-image flows join the spaces of uneven development and heighten awareness of both opportunities and any likely pitfalls. Just as peasant migrants venture far from home in search of jobs, many of which are sub-subcontracted by overseas investors, provincial television stations in China aggressively seek connection with the mainstream precisely to enhance entrepreneurial opportunities so that the provincial cities and towns will not seem to be left behind.

It is in this context, responding to the divided world that they inhabit, that digital video (DV) documentary practitioners perform the work of vernacular ethnographers who film their native areas or the people known to themselves or their friends. DV has made it possible for young practitioners to take hold of complex and contradictory relations without having to pigeonhole those relations into separate categories.¹⁶ Many of these practitioners began as amateurs. They attend to the conditions of oppression

13 See Eric Kit-wai Ma, “Rethinking Media Studies: The Case of China,” in *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, ed. James Curran and Myung Jing Park (New York: Routledge, 2000), 21–34.

14 On television’s reports of crisis and catastrophe that assert the medium’s capacity, see Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 269–285.

15 See the chapters on “Local Content” and “CCTV and the Advertising Media,” in Jing Wang, *Brand New China*.

16 See Jia Zhangke, “Capturing a Transforming Reality,” in Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 183–206.

found in the midst of modernization and development in titles such as *Before the Flood* (*Yan mo* [Li Yifan and Yan Yu, 2005]), *West of the Tracks* (*Ti xi qu* [Wang Bing, 2003]), *Feast of Villains* (*Liu mang de sheng yan* [Pan Jianlin, 2008]), and *Petition* (Zhao Liang, 2009). These films probe the struggles and sufferings of displaced residents, petitioners, unemployed industry workers, and students who died under the rubble of sub-standard schools during the Sichuan earthquake. Most are unsanctioned memories of violence, detailing the mandatory demolition and corruption that do not get television coverage. While their circulation is often limited to student and film circles, many are also accessible via the Internet, and some are sold by vendors specializing in pirated DVD copies of foreign movies. Some projects have international distributors, such as *Storm Under the Sun* (Xiaolian Peng and Louisa Wei, 2007) and *Yasukuni* (Ying Li, 2007), which offer new insights into China's Anti-Rightist Movement of the 1950s and Japanese enshrinement of the soldiers of imperial wars, and which are collaborations between the young directors who have lived overseas and the filmmakers (as well as the Youth Film Studio) in Beijing. DV projects increasingly take up realism and verité that turn the declarations of the "Dogma 95" group into practice, producing many timely responses to local conflicts.

There are reasons to be both optimistic and cautious, however, when amateur DV and films are more than ever before bearing witness to the everyday. Their propensity for attaining Western critical attention can be a threat when such attention proves to be assimilative to Western-centered or neoliberal rather than cosmopolitical or ethical perspectives. There have been many precedents for this—from festivals on the one hand to ideological containment on the other. There can be no presumption of cosmopolitan outlook in the reception of images of death, and framing devices are not just literal; thus impact is not guaranteed from even the most rigorously realist pictures, as Susan Sontag has argued.¹⁷ The moral authority of authentic photographs of death and oppression can become embroiled in the mystified relationship between history and power. Furthermore, framing devices are not simply media or even ideology based; more importantly, they can refer to the integrity of cultural principles that are the grounds of a working community. Thus, representation does not in itself forge a community; indifference and cynicism can come from the countervailing forces that made a symbolic order oppressive in the first place. In the social memory theory of Maurice Halbwachs, implicit cultural principles are communicated through family, school, religion, and social groups. Those principles with explicit and implicit ethical, moral, communal, and ecological aspects provide the foundation for relations between the self and the other.¹⁸ These principles anchor the visible testaments in an interpretive community, and they should not be for sale to the highest bidder. That Chinese blockbusters readily play Hollywood's game at the expense of telling urgent stories of the current situation may be taken to be a sign of the excessive weakening of cultural principles throughout China's modern century, with the Cultural Revolution and the economic liberation as two successive assaults on these principles. Seen in a similar light, the narcissistic post-memory films and the exotic European-themed mansions

17 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

18 Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Cosner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1992.

discussed earlier could be the manifestation of the swing toward a self-serving mentality as the guiding credo. Vast displacements in different directions would mean that cultural principles are losing their context, and anchoring is radically destabilized as the displaced are always on the move.¹⁹

Tropes of Nation and History: From Trauma to Monstrosity. In view of the above, it is not surprising that trauma theory and trauma-inflected perspectives of history have migrated to Chinese film studies from outside the PRC.²⁰ In the PRC, the official centennial celebration of Chinese cinemas commemorated achievements of mainland-centered Chinese cinemas.²¹ Chinese Film Studies overseas, however, turned nationalist historiography into the occasion for critical inquiry.

The modern nation-state of China began with the Opium War of the nineteenth century, according to Rey Chow, Chris Berry, and Mary Farquhar.²² In Berry and Farquhar's *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation*, modern nationalist historiography appears in four classical realist films about the Opium War made in 1943, 1959, 1963, and 1997, during the Kuomintang and the Communist eras.²³ Going beyond a singular origin of trauma, Michael Berry's *A History of Pain* engages representation of several key loci of traumatic occurrences to show that media and popular culture perform transformative work to confront the pain of becoming modern. Characterizing the forces of atrocities as "centrifugal" and "centripetal," the study offers the critical insight that self-inflicted injuries among the people of a nation-state are just as harsh and relentless as the ones inflicted by imperialism.²⁴ China's modern, spiritual crisis manifests itself in the troubled relations between the individual and the collective in Ban Wang's study *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China*. Wang argues that history and memory have emerged as strong countervailing resources against the homogenizing and amnesiac cultures of capitalist globalization,

19 On demolition and memory in many Chinese cities, see Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

20 Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) is a reference for Wang Ban and also for Yomi Braester, *Witness Against History: Literature, Film, and Public Discourse in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Walter Benjamin's seminal essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and his work on German tragedy inform Wang Ban's discussions, and Benjamin's writings have been translated into Chinese.

21 In 2005, China Film Press published the twelve-title series of the Beijing Film Archive's "A Century of Chinese Cinema Research Book Series," which has the minister of broadcasting and television and the heads of the State Film Bureau as its chief editor and deputy editors. This series cover topics in film theory, genre, author, acting, industry, and technology. In 2006, China Film Press published the thirteen-title historical research series of the Beijing Film Academy's "Professional History Research in Chinese Cinema" series whose chief editors are professors and lecturers of the Beijing Film Academy. This series covers topics in film art, culture, cinematography, screenwriting, acting, production/exhibition, sound, music, and animation.

22 Chow elaborates on her "logic of the wound" in "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," *Boundary 2*, 25, no. 3 (1998): 1–24.

23 *Wan shi liu fang* (Wancang Bu, Weibang Ma-Xu, Yuang Xiaozhong, and Shilin Zhu, 1942); *Lin Zexu* (Junli Zheng, 1959); *The Opium War* (*Yapian Zhangzheng* [Quanxi Lin, 1963]); and *The Opium War* (*Yapian Zhanzheng* [Jin Xie, 1997]). See Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 23–29.

24 Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

and that the schizophrenic texts of allegory manifest post-traumatic awareness of the experience of modernity through writing.²⁵

An influential precedent to Michael Berry's and Ban Wang's work is David Der-wei Wang's unique study, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China*. Consciously disabusing literature of the imposed categorizations of premodern, modernist, or postmodernist, Der-wei Wang connects selective imperial-era texts (late Ming public records and early Qing novels) with 1950s fiction from Taiwan. His trans-historical and trans-local inquiry enacts textual interdiscourse on history and identifies ironic intersections in the rhetorical strategies of politically antagonistic (pro- and anti-communist) discourse, thus consciously resisting Chinese "mainland-centered geopolitics."²⁶ Wang's critique of modernity engages a poetics of monstrosity through a genealogy of tales in which a vicious *Taowu* monster—a "mythopoetic" figure in fiction of the seventeenth century—speaks to the "intertwined relations of violence and historicity" three centuries later.²⁷ His study painstakingly reads the paradoxical intertwining of violence, sexual perversity, and modern consciousness in literary and historical narratives in order to reflect on how murderous brutality functions in the name of progress, revolution, and utopia. Writing history as the story of divine powers and relentless brutality (and writing history as the story of violence, and as complicit with violence for both the writer and the written), Chinese literature engages in complex thoughts on a "polymorphous" reality. Monstrous historicity challenges critics to face "the fact of contested modernities" outside the preconceived mainstream and canon. For Wang, comparative literary studies must not pay lip service to "historicizing" and to "marginality," as it would be equally scandalous for the same critics to remain oblivious to the dispersed, non-mainland-centric local contexts of writing and to refuse to recognize critical resistance from lesser-known Taiwanese authors.²⁸

Contradictory Thought and Directions. Resistance to a modernist mainstream that marginalizes local resources opens up an inquiry into a rich yet not canonized repertoire of literary and film resources that challenge the perceived divide between premodern, modernist, and postmodernist perspectives and paradigms. Der-wei Wang boldly confronts the unrealized claims of "always historicize" as a kind of critic's "self-parody,"²⁹ and his trope of "monstrosity" argues explicitly against the progressive view of history, while it implicitly shows the horrific results of China's modernizing sensibility, which first defines then pushes aside "tradition" while adopting philosophies and models that are at best half understood and mostly untested in China. On the basis of

25 Ban Wang, *Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 101–112.

26 David Der-wei Wang, *The Monster That Is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 9.

27 *Ibid.*, 9–10.

28 *Ibid.*, 6–10.

29 Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982) begins with the call to "always historicize." Der-wei Wang could be referring to this or to a Chinese mainland-centered Marxist literary criticism that is intended to intervene in modernist literary history.

Wang's critique, the impetus for keeping the lessons learned from the past thus cannot come from an optimistic view of history or from modernization itself, nor can an identity formation depend on that which has brought carnage to many.

Is de-Westernizing memory studies and history writing necessary to avoid the traps of borrowed models or the pitfalls of Dipesh Chakrabarty's "provincial" Eurocentrism? Is it necessary to map a terrain of "Greater Chinese" film and literature in order to theorize their inscription of the traumatic experiences of modernity from below? Does a kind of authentic and epic memory exist that would provide grounding for ethical-political practice for the present? These are debatable questions. In his essay in *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, Eric Kit-wai Ma maps the changes and "anomalies" (by Western standards) of China's media scenes in a socialist market economy, and his analysis employs the global tools of Cultural Studies while remaining diligent about examining the premises in Western theory inappropriate for his study.³⁰ Beyond erratic reform, periodic repression, and a deep-seated contradiction between state control and market forces for media in the PRC, Ma sees structural complexity, rapidity of change, uneven control, and discrepant reading zones. He goes on to warn against drawing conclusions based on liberal notions of the market, while identifying the nuances and unevenness in the mediascape. For Ma, differences in the modernity of Chinese media do not demand their own Chinese media theory. He simply cautions that in order for cultural theory to find resonance in Chinese media, it must remain alert to multiple facets and to the absence of unifying sameness. Thinking along this line, the radical unevenness that characterizes China's mediascape makes room for inquiries—theoretical, critical, anthropological, and creative—to engage in the space of testimony where contradictory thought is a necessity and not an exception.

Film and DV, as media bearing testimony to both history and the present, have many tasks at hand. The huge gaps in wealth and opportunities between the inseparable first and third worlds of China are being felt every day by many. The self-promotional skyline images of metropolitan zones in Beijing, Shanghai, and other first-tier cities can barely disguise the destruction that is economically driven rather than prompted by war or politics. Still, in the midst of dispersed violence local artists and filmmakers have found unexpected creativity within themselves and in the people with whom they interact. Jia Zhangke's DV features *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*; 2006), *24 City* (*Er shi cheng ji*; 2008) join a growing corpus of DV documentaries, artists and writers are conversing with people who bear witness to an uncanny survival (and revival) of human principles in the midst of monumental demolition and flux in the Chinese mainland alone. To be an ethical agent of history, these filmmakers must know where they want to take their audience and what actions they intend their testimony to prompt when their work brings the world's attention to an array of unsanctioned memories of modernity.³¹ *

I would like to thank the editors for their feedback.

30 Eric Kit-wai Ma, "Rethinking Media Studies," 21–34.

31 See dGenerate Films, "Sixty Years of Unsanctioned Memories in the People's Republic," dGenerate Films, <http://dgeneratefilms.com/critical-essays/sixty-years-of-unsanctioned-memories-in-the-peoples-republic/> (accessed March 25, 2010).

Writing on Film History, Far from the Canon

by FATİH ÖZGÜVEN

Cleopatra went on general release throughout the world in 1964, but, as usual, those of us who lived in Istanbul did not get a chance to see Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor's star turn until two years later. In those days, films came to us several years after release, because Turkish distributors were not able to meet Hollywood's price for opening-run distribution. . . . Istanbul would sigh with impatience and say, "Well let's see when it finally gets here."

—Orhan Pamuk¹

Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's remarks on the belated arrival of films in the late 1960s and most of the 1970s reveal not only a cause of exasperation for the filmgoing public, but also a source of great unhappiness for this aspiring (teenage) film critic of the time. "When I think back to that day when I first saw *Cleopatra*," Pamuk goes on to say, "what I remember best . . . is not the film itself but the thrill of watching it."² The mere "thrill of watching the film" was, although satisfying, not enough if you wanted to put films into some kind of context, make sense of and write about them. Even if it was only in your own "film notebook."

I remember my childhood days turning into agonizing adolescence, not only because of the usual growing pains but also because of such painful considerations as: "What do I make of this Chabrol which is one of two Chabrols shown during this French film week? Is still another viewing of the *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyonkin*; Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925) too much of a good thing? At least, *Potemkin* . . . is a classic. But I am sick and tired of it. And of Şarlo (Charlot = Charlie Chaplin) too. Why can't we have some Keaton? I long to see some 'decadent' films! Is *Death in Venice* (*Morte a Venezia*; Luchino Visconti, 1971) it? Or is it about Dirk Bogarde pursuing 'the Platonic ideal of

1 Orhan Pamuk, "Entr'acte; or, Ah, Cleopatra! Going to See a Film in Istanbul," in *Other Colors: Essays and a Story* (*Öteki renkler: Seçme yazılar ve bir hikaye* [1999]), trans. Maureen Freely [2007] (New York: Vintage, 2008), 300.

2 Ibid.

beauty'? After all, the auteur of *Rocco e sui fratelli* (1960) and *La terra trema* (1948) cannot be frivolous. However . . ."

In the rather suffocating political and cultural climate of the times, with the city cinemathèque a shadow of its French counterpart—only much poorer and much more sectarian—one was restricted to a frugal and capricious diet. One had to make do with what was on the program and be thankful for the cinemathèque café. The various "cultural institutes" of the city might or might not be forthcoming. Cinema was important for most of them, though they each approached it differently: Italians specialized in gala-style affairs where you had to sit with the socialite who wanted to see "this shocking art film." The English were dodgy, and the Anglophile filmgoer had to make do with 1940s English cinema or the Ealing comedies, at best. The French obviously had very good taste in films—but why did you have only one screening of *The Mother and the Whore* (*La maman et la putain*; Jean Eustache, 1973) and that next to the latest de Broca comedy, when you really wanted to see some Godard? The Americans had sporadic screenings—and then none at all: too many security considerations. To enjoy the odd screening of a Kazan or Ford film felt like winning the lottery. The Germans were serious and good at programming and did not seem to be intimidated by the latest Fassbinder folly or even an unfashionable Kluge. One was thankful, if somewhat lost. How to put Rainer Werner's interesting but crazy output into context?

The viewer who was not a "-phile" of any of those cultures—which was difficult since the majority of teen film fans attended one of the high schools in the city teaching in one of their languages—but simply a fan of "cinema" had to be everywhere, all the time, trying not to miss any opportunity that came around. Still, vigilance was not enough.

Reading books helped. Literature did put a lot into context. Tennessee Williams was a godsend in making sense of Petra von Kant. Or when you'd read the novella *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann you could see that Visconti's version of it was just that—a version. One got better at comparing. You knew, for example, that the intellectually approved Yılmaz Güney-Lütfi Akad classic *Kızılmak Karakoyun*, about a group of people moving a herd of sheep from one village to a grazing spot shared something to do with the story told in Hawks's *Red River* (1948).

But one seldom saw domestic films. As Pamuk explains, like "most of Turkey's westernized middle class and like most of my generation, I went very seldom to see 'domestic' films."³ I was of the same generation, more alert to the domestic output, if only in order to be able to say "We have our own masterpieces, too"—at least when in conversation with fellow cinephiles.

The interesting anxiety created by being far from the canon and desire to grasp it, in some cases literally "dreaming" about the missing pieces, created for the aspiring film critic not only a sensation of deep regret but also, in the long run, a kind of eroticism—the eroticism of prolonged and constantly delayed climax. Being aware of a fatalistic bent in one's culture, and particularly the myth of the unattainability of the Loved One thematized in the love stories of the Eastern canon ("Leyla ile Mejnun," "Ferhad ile Shirin," and even in domestic cinema itself, the prostitute of

3 Ibid.

bad faith and her poor yet proud suitor in the film *Vesikalı Yarım* [*My Loved One, the Prostitute*; Lütfi Akad, 1968]), did tinge this eroticism with an enjoyable tone. And then the mysterious verdict voiced by Susan Sontag would pop up in the midst of one's readings and throw further light on one's malaise: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."⁴ That was close to home. It was, however perversely, the situation the young film lover had to find himself in. And if Sontag's dictum were to be adapted to one's needs, he might as well savor his misery and make sense not only of the canon but also of its unattainability. The missing Welles would turn up one day and might be even more wonderful than he had ever expected. But, then again, maybe not. This erotically colored distance, then, might even provoke something unexpected: a critical distance from the film. In the world of constant waiting, one has to gather clues and follow hands pointing "this way" or "that way," solidifying the ground one is standing on. That might, in the parlance of love, translate as cynicism. But then the Eastern love story scorns the joys of immediacy, and the impatient would-be lover can only sigh, and perhaps add, "Well let's see when it finally gets here." *

4 Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1961), 14.

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