

Affinity Group Report: World Cinema and World Literature (13 participants)

What is the epistemological framework of world cinema and how does it relate to - and in what does it differ from- the epistemological framework of world literature, of comparative studies, of cultural studies, or of film studies? In the study of world cinema, can we fix strict boundaries among these related disciplines? Or should we always consider research at the intersection (should we say the overlap?) of these diverse theoretical approaches? Besides, should the study of world cinema always take into account the role of the market, circulation, and distribution of films in different countries with the connected phenomena of cultural translation and cultural clash? And finally, how can we teach world cinema?

These have been the main topics around which the thirteen members of the affinity group have discussed and shared their research interests along the eight meetings held by the World Cinema and World Literature Affinity Group at 2015 IWL seminar in Lisbon. Most participants were PhD students, but there were also MA students as well as Faculty members. They came from institutions in Australia, Austria, China, Germany, Japan, Romania, Serbia, Spain, and the United States.

In each session two members shared their research work, essays or interests with the rest of the group, and a respondent took care of setting the main points for the debate. Some members presented papers grounded in their MA or PhD current research, others shared new research projects, and others commented the syllabi they prepared for world cinema courses. The result was a very dynamic discussion, with many comments and an extremely interesting exchange of suggestions for future readings, as well as with many proposals for expanding related research fields.

The first meeting was partly dedicated to a short account of the individual research project and its relation to the paper each member intended to present to the rest of the group and partly to the organization of the following sessions along a few general items: the epistemological framework of world cinema; differences and correspondences between world cinema and world literature; intersections between film studies, cultural studies and comparative studies; problems of circulation and reception of cinema; language, territories, cultures; geography of the visual; world cinema and translation studies; teaching world cinema: theory and practice.

We started our discussions from this last item (how to teach world cinema) thanks to the presentation of Jason Parry (PhD student at Binghamton University) who shared with the group two syllabi he had prepared for two World Cinema courses: "Cities, War and Civilization" and "Cities in Film and Fiction". After his presentation the group discussed the pedagogical approach to world cinema and its relation with other disciplines, in particular literature.

The group had the occasion to go back to the cinematic and literary representation of cities (subject of the second syllabus of Jason Parry), during another meeting when Miyuki Yamada (PhD student at the University of Tokyo) mentioned her PhD

research topic: the representation of Buenos Aires in world literature and world cinema. In the meeting, Miyuki shared with the group her MA research on the Argentinian writer Manuel Puig and his use of cinematic techniques in literature. More concretely her essay “Manuel Puig: Representation of Cinematic Icons, Heroines and Motherhood” focused on how the images of cinematic icons contributed to the literary construction of female characters and the notion of motherhood in Manuel Puig’s works.

During the same meeting, the group also discussed a completely different representation of femininity and focused more broadly on gendered identities in films and writing thanks to Elisabeth Lechner (PhD student at the University of Vienna) who presented an essay on the director, producer and actress Lena Dunham. In her presentation “Postfeminist Body and Food Politics in Lena Dunham’s TV Series ‘Girls’ and her autobiographical essay collection ‘Not That Kind of Girl’” Elisabeth raised the issue of how pop culture works in cinema and literature, and more concretely of postfeminist media constructions of gender identities and their innovative dimension in relation to established social roles.

The problem of academic boundaries among different disciplines, which was already present in the first meeting, was raised again in the presentations of Dragana Bedov (PhD student at the University of Belgrade) and Harry Kashdan (PhD student at the University of Michigan). Dragana presented the paper “Literature and Film- Two Sides of the Same Line” on the theoretical framework from which one can study the formal relationship between films and literature, more concretely between writing and filming, seeing and reading while Harry shared with the group a concrete case study: the relationship between food and memory in Mediterranean literature and films where food works as a *lieu de memoire* for migrants. After these presentations, the group discussed on the difference between to “see through” cinema and to “look at” cinema, on the semantic flatness of some plots which use cinema as a simple means of illustration, a discussion that lead to films that use the camera to add a new gaze that cannot be found in literature. Along the whole meeting the group constantly reflected on the theoretical borders between food studies, comparative studies and film studies.

The intersections of world cinema with literary theory and sociology were discussed during another meeting in which the presentations focused on the intersection of politics and arts in the cinema of different geographical areas. In particular, Jyhene Keksi (PhD student at the University of Sidney) presented the essay “The World Literature and World Cinema of Drowning: a Study of the Representation of ‘illegal’ Immigration from the Arab World to the Global North” putting special emphasis on the contrast between the bondless trade and the new human borders in the Mediterranean. The second presentation of the day was dedicated to the 9/11 terrorist attack and its visual treatment in relation to its literary representation. Silvia Dumitrache (PhD student at CESI Bucharest) analyzed different visual representations of the images of terrorism in several documentary and fiction genres, as well as the new narrative forms that have arisen after 9/11 to represent trauma.

Other items that appeared throughout the meetings and the papers presented by the members of the group were the problem of geographical definition of art, the cultural implications of both world cinema and literature with cultural translation, and its relation with the market distribution of films.

On the first of these items Méliissa Gélinas (PhD student at the University of Michigan) presented an essay titled “The Languages of ‘Francophone’ Sub-Saharan African Filmmaking: Tracing the Archive of a Trans-Individual, Transnational Phenomenon.” In her presentation, Méliissa examined the socio-cultural valence and the limits of the term “Francophone” Sub-Saharan African cinema. She then argued that given important socio-cultural, historical, and stylistic factors most “Francophone” Sub-Saharan African films could be expected to textually reflect multilingual and diglossic realities. As her essay tried to demonstrate, this assumption, while theoretically valid, must nevertheless be re-assessed in the light of crucial production factors, including technical, financial, and institutional norms and policies. It is only by taking these extra-textual factors into account that the linguistic complexities of “Francophone” Sub-Saharan African filmmaking can be adequately conceptualised.

In order to consider the other side of the market coin, in the same session Zhu Ning (MA student at Fudan University) presented a paper on the cinema of the very popular Taiwanese-born American film director Ang Lee and considered how his films westernize the cultural identity of its characters in order to make the fiction more suitable for all publics. The group discussion focused particularly on the differences between the identity for the self and identity for the other and how these differences intervene in the production of world cinema.

The last two presentations insisted on these links between culture, translation and market: Xirui Chu (PhD student at Tamkang University) presented an essay on a film by the Japanese director Ozu and its cultural translation for western public: “Images to Languages: Yasujirō Ozu’s *An Autumn Afternoon*”. Using Roland Barthes’ concept of *anchorage*, Xirui Chu analyzed the different titles that the film received in English, French, and Portuguese speaking countries. He also presented an iconic study of the different posters used to advertise the film in these diverse countries. This essay set the basis for a group discussion on the semantic values of images and texts, with special attention to the circulation market and to how this semantic value is related to the idea of the otherness in the reception culture.

The last exposition took on the similar issues. More specifically, the research project presented by Liying Sun (Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Heidelberg University) focused on the distribution, circulation and reception of Hollywood silent films in China during 1910s-1920s. Taking *Way Down East* (1920), a film by D. W. Griffith, as a starting point, Liying shared with the group the basis of her research on the relation between the global circulation and the local meaning of world cinema. Her case study discussed the role of translation in the practice of screening the foreign silent film in China; furthermore, she also examined the cultural reception of images, performances, and narratives of the film within the Chinese historical contexts.

Each session of the group provided a very lively debate about the selected items and the papers presented. Also the members who did not present a paper contributed very actively with their comments suggesting further points of contact between the different presentations. Especially in the last meeting -that was dedicated to draw some conclusion on the main subjects emerged during the previous sessions as well as to highlight the principal problematic aspects of World cinema- the group agreed that much has been done but a lot is still to do to define a proper methodology for world cinema that might include categories and theoretical perspectives linked to the specific visual, textual and commercial dimensions of the seventh art. We all enjoyed our meetings and ended with the desire to see world cinema more present in our academic lives and syllabi.

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