GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Transnational Cinema in the Global South

By Parichay Patra | April 22, 2024

This essay analyzes and explains the idea of the "transnational" in cinema studies from the perspective of the Global South. Global art cinema, world cinema, and related research have attracted considerable attention since the 2000s, especially since the global film festival space has evolved from being a mere platform for exhibition to a space that defines cinema itself, along with its intended business model(s), targeted spectators, and possible modes of production. However, what it means to be transnational beyond the purview of exhibition and reception remains an unresolved question in cinema studies. The idea of transnational cinema has a wider appeal to cinema studies researchers as it spans several geographies of film production and is not confined to any specific geopolitics such as the Global South. On the other hand, the idea of a Global South cinema has a transnational connotation, surpassing insular, national cinematic contexts. This essay will examine the formation of both discourses in cinema studies, including those using transnational as a framework and those revolving around the concept of the Global South, moving gradually towards their points of intersection.

Formation of a Cine-Political Context

Addressing the erstwhile Third World, which gradually and conceptually evolved into the Global South after the fall of the Eastern Bloc, requires an engagement with its historico-political coordinates. The term "Third World" remains strongly associated with the non-aligned nations during the Cold War and which originated in the historic 1955 Bandung Conference of African and Asian nations.[1] Hosted by Indonesia and an outcome of the non-alignment ideology that was being propagated by the Prime Minister of the newly independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, it did not yield much success despite its symbolic significance of bringing several postcolonial states to the same platform, with statesmen such as Nehru, Zhou Enlai, Josip Broz Tito, and others participating. Although the conference was useful for Nehru's diplomatic aspirations and his leadership in India, its political impact was short-lived as its apparent anti-imperialist tendencies were interpreted differently by different nations and alliances (Zachariah 2004, 219-22).[2] However, its ideological impact on the formation of the Global South as a conceptual apparatus in the domain of culture cannot be understated. As Anne Garland Mahler (2018) argues, this legacy can be traced in the Tricontinental Conference of 1966 that was hosted by Cuba, which was more radical in nature, was attended by Fidel Castro, Amílcar Cabral, Salvador Allende, among others and that formed the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL).

When it comes to the cinematic context, the Global South should ideally be considered both as a "category" and as the evidence of alternative cine-political (and not only geopolitical) formations. The emergent domain of film festival research offers a platform where the

efficacy of the concept can be tested and historically traced.[3] Festivals in the USSR in the long 1960s accommodated films from non-allied nations that were considered friendly towards the Eastern Bloc, and the USSR authorities offered scholarships for budding filmmakers to be trained at VGIK, the state-run film school in Moscow.[4] At the same time, politically active filmmakers from Latin America, such as Fernando Solanas, did not have a sustainable engagement with the Soviet festivals primarily because of their different ideological standpoint, which favored the more radical leftism of Che Guevara and the PRC over the Soviet's peaceful co-existence and imperialist strategies (Djagalov 2020, 177-79). Indian popular cinema from Bombay, meanwhile, had strong appeal for the Soviet audience and several Hindi cinema stars, ranging from Raj Kapoor to Mithun Chakraborty, earned enormous success in the Eastern Bloc.[5]

Art cinema discourse, while being shaped by film clubs, societies, and cinémathèques in the Global South, also betrayed strong evidence of transnational mediations. In the Indian context, festivals and screenings organized by the film societies were mostly dominated by films from Eastern Europe, primarily because of the Indian state's close association with the USSR.[6] It was easier for film societies to procure prints of such films with the help of the embassies, consulates, and cultural centers. Apart from Soviet and Yugoslavian films, canonical works of such iconic auteurs from Eastern Europe as Andrzej Wajda (Poland), István Szabó (Hungary), and Jiří Menzel (erstwhile Czechoslovakia) circulated in the festival circuit. In some parts of Latin America, film clubs were mostly motivated by art cinema discourse arriving from France primarily through the geopolitical and class interests that were formed during the Cold War period, and such European mediation has recently been subjected to film-historical research (Navitski 2023).

Global South cine-political solidarity took a more nuanced shape in the long 1960s. A few years after Bandung, the 1959 Cuban Revolution, and the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, tension between the United States and Cuba led to significant political formations in Latin America. With Che Guevara's internationalist revolutionary mission contributing to insurrections in several parts of the Global South (Congo and Bolivia, for instance), the question of transnational solidarity impacted various domains of culture. Guevara's assassination in Bolivia in 1967, in turn, led to the iconic cinematic representation in the classic radical film by Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968). May 1968 in France and its worldwide impact was not limited to the political historical archive either, as Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin abandoned the industry and formed their radical Marxist cinema group named after Dziga Vertov that remained active for the next few years. In 1968, revolutionary Cuba organized and hosted the exhibition Del Tercer Mundo (Of the Third World), which offered a significant platform for agit-prop and avant-garde artists and intellectuals even beyond the Third World.[7]

As Global South cinema went on circulating in mainstream and marginal festival circuits, it included exposure of African filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène, Dgibril Diop Mambéty and Souleymane Cissé to wider audiences. More organized Global South cinematic networks were formed with the advent of Third Cinema as theory and practice.[8] With the formation of a Third World Cinema Committee, three major Third Cinema conferences were organized in Algiers (December 1973), Buenos Aires (May 1974), and Montreal (June 1974), respectively, where several filmmakers and critics from Latin America and Africa participated, along with

producers and programmers from Europe and the United States who remained associated with Latin American political cinema. The Montreal conference saw the participation of Solanas from Argentina, Julio García Espinosa of Cuba, the Italian critic Guido Aristarco, and Bill Susman, the American producer of Raymundo Gleyzer's cinema. There were several debates on the possible production-distribution-circulation of radical cinema, alternative and militant cinematic initiatives and interventions, and cinema's alignment with the international socialist groups (Mestman 2013-14, 49-50). The major points of discussion included the possible association between post-1968 political cinema in Europe and Third Cinema from Latin America and the exhibition of Latin American militant cinema in Europe. The possibility of a global anti-imperialist solidarity front with effective collaboration between the First and Third Worlds and the formation of the idea of an "Estates-General of Third Cinema" were also discussed (Mestman 2015, 29-40).[9] Producers and distributors from the Global North raised issues related to the possible ways in which European/American exhibition channels and cinémathèques contribute to the making of militant cinema and associated political struggles in Latin America.

Several decades later, resistance to the neoliberal project and to the multinational conglomerates making industrial cinema remains one of the primary concerns of Global South cinema. Although some contemporary research remains unsure about the presence of a distinctively "southern aesthetics" in cinema, this research focuses mostly on Global South cinema's engagement with local forms of aesthetic production and transnational cinematic circulation in an era of streaming platforms as some of the major issues in this context (Menon and Taha 2024).

A Possible Methodology

In order to make meaning of the transnational as a critical concept and method, it should be noted that the idea of the trans-nation and transnationalism has long been prevalent in literary studies, especially in comparative literature. The comparativist framework necessitated the foregrounding of the trans-nation in the discussion of literary associations and waves, with the authority of the nation-state becoming consistently challenged and problematized. Franco Moretti's exploration of world literature (Moretti 2000, 1-12), Fredric Jameson's reading of literatures from the Third World as national allegories (Jameson 1986, 65-88) and Aijaz Ahmad's rebuttal to Jameson (Ahmad 1987, 3-25) are cases in point. Many dimensions of and debates on world literature have continued to proliferate, such as the "world literary space" as a conceptual tool (Casanova 2007), the global politics of untranslatability (Apter 2013), the planetary and ecological concerns in world literature, and so on. Literary studies scholars from the Global South often offer critiques of world literature, tracing the journeys of Western literary forms in postcolonial locations as the latter reshape such European forms (Bhattacharya and Sen 2019).

In cinema studies, invoking a comparative model of research or comparative film studies (Willemen 2005, 98-112) and considering transnational cinema as a method began gaining prominence in the 2000s as a means to counter the hegemonic dominance of the national cinema paradigm. However, even though most contemporary research on transnational cinema finds its place in Western academia, its enormous potential for the Global South remains considerably undertheorized and vastly unrealized.[10] Like the cinema studies academic world in general, scholarship on transnational cinema also remains significantly

Euro-American, with occasional consideration of East Asian cinemas having transnational links with Europe.[11]

On the other side of the spectrum, national cinema has dominated as *the* research framework in such Global South locations as India, where the popular film industries and their complex negotiations with postcolonial nation-state(s) contribute enormously to cinematic discourse (Prasad 1998). Some critics have argued that the old cinematic medium/celluloid used to be intrinsically associated with the nation-state, while the advent of the digital crossed national boundaries (Rajadhyaksha 2011). Very often the idea of the transnational in cinema is reduced to the research on diasporic or exilic cinemas. Hamid Naficy (2001), to give one example, has referred to this as "accented cinema" in the context of Asian/Iranian immigrant/exiled auteurs in the West. However, this essay aims to look beyond such methods and modes, starting with the problems posed by the concept of the transnational in cinema studies, followed by an exploration of its location in and possibilities for the Global South.

The emergence of the transnational in cinema studies has a distinctive trajectory. It raises certain key questions regarding the production, distribution, circulation, and consumption of cinema, as well as of the movement of film publics, apparatuses, exhibitors, genres, and technologies. In the domain of popular cinema, such movements have persisted since the inception of the medium itself. Cinema's invention in Paris in 1895 was closely followed by its global circulation, as a near-simultaneous exhibition model started touring the world and found the fairground as its site of public consumption. In popular cinema, after cinema's institutionalization in Hollywood, several genres emerged, evolved, and were experimented with, with generic elements lending themselves to many filmmaking locations.

The question that emerges in this context is whether transnational cinema can be considered as a method if cinema's transnational travel dates to the very inception of the medium. It should be noted, however, that the idea of the transnational in cinema studies does not refer only to the global history of a given national cinema, by which we usually mean the movements of film-publics and international exhibitions of films produced by that industry.[12] Here, the term "transnational" raises several ideological issues and offers a research method that is gaining ground. It includes particular histories, more nuanced networks of circulation beyond the traditional exhibition space (clandestine cine-political events, for instance), and uncanny geographies (associations between several geopolitical regions without shared histories) that emerged at crucial historical junctures.

Contemporary Transnational Cinema

Several global events since 2001 have challenged the dominance of neoliberal globalization. After the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, the Global North nations (USA, UK, EU, Australia and Canada) put in place several anti-immigrant mechanisms and anti-terrorism laws that severely curbed individual freedom of movement and expression. The global expansion of multinational corporations, their capital, and the championing of a neoliberal economy did not prevent (and arguably actively contributed to) the rise of militant right-wing nationalisms. Several authoritarian regimes and predominantly male authoritarian leaders have emerged across the globe. During and even after the Covid-19 pandemic, global travel and movement remain restricted. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the resultant political and economic crisis have led to an increasingly unstable world order

crippled by jingoistic nationalism. With this resurgence of right-wing nationalism and the emergence of new Asian nationalisms such as the ones in the People's Republic of China and in an increasingly authoritarian India, where does the transnational stand?

In this rapidly changing and evolving geopolitical context, it may be argued that transnational cinema in the Global South can engender and facilitate significant modes of South-South encounter through histories of movements, aesthetics, politics and ideologies. These histories might not be mediated by the Global North and its dominant cinemas. These encounters may connect such Global South locations cinematically that may not have shared histories of encounter with colonialism and modernity. Contemporary cinema studies research is increasingly taking into account the many associations between several Global South cinemas that went beyond the paradigm of standalone national cinema traditions.

South-South Cine-Solidarity: The Indian Instances

In my own research on the Indian New Wave cinemas of the long 1960s, an art cinema movement partially supported by the Indian state, I have argued that this heterogeneous film movement, despite being scattered over several film production centers and traditions, consistently associated itself with many other cinematic and pre-cinematic traditions of the Global South (Patra 2016). In the case of Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, their insertion of Indian/Asian art traditions (in the form of miniature paintings and North Indian classical music) within cinema rejected the Renaissance perspective model, its illusionism, and the standard norms of realism. In the case of the politically radical cinema of Mrinal Sen, his close association with Latin American filmmakers of his time (Fernando Solanas of Argentina, Jorge Sanjinés of Bolivia, Glauber Rocha of Brazil, Miguel Littin and Patricio Guzmán of Chile) can be found in his autobiographical writings. He also mentions his role in the collective protest against the incarceration of Carlos Álvarez by the Colombian state and his encounter with the Argentine radical filmmaker Raymundo Gleyzer in Berlin in 1973, three years before his disappearance under the Civic-Military Dictatorship of General Jorge Rafael Videla (Patra 2023, 143-53). Sen made audio-visual references to films that engaged with Global South conditions and ongoing struggles in his 'city trilogy': films such as *Calcutta 71* (1972) and *Padatik* (*Urban Guerrilla*, 1973). Made in the context of the Naxalite insurgency (a radical Maoist group) in 1970s India, *Padatik* includes audio-visual references to Joris Ivens' documentary on Vietnam, *The Threatening Sky* (1966) and to Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas's *La hora de los hornos* (1968). Such citational engagements with Global South locations and/or cinema contributed to the formation of a transnational film aesthetic.

More visual references to Latin American Third Cinema can also be found in the Indian New Wave, as Ashish Rajadhyaksha has argued:

> …as we see in several Indian films' disconcertingly direct links with Latin America: the overt quotation in Mani Kaul et al.'s *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1976) to Rocha's *Antonio Das Môrtes* (1969), and the explicit evocation of the Argentinian *La hora de los hornos* (1967) in Saeed Mirza's *Arvind Desai ki Ajeeb Dastaan* (1978). (2009, 240)

Recent cinema studies research, meanwhile, has identified several similar instances of aesthetic association. Lucia Nagib (2020), for instance, offers a provocatively novel perspective, arguing that instead of a general term such as "world cinema," the more

theoretically-informed description “realist cinema” is more precise since it goes beyond questions of exhibition or audience and turns to more precisely aesthetic questions.[13] The rise of “slow cinema” as a global cinematic phenomenon is another example of this tendency, as many auteurs from widely different cinematic traditions (including filmmakers from the Global South, such as the Filipino Lav Diaz, Argentine Lisandro Alonso, or those from Europe’s economically weaker nations like Albert Serra of Spain and Pedro Costa of Portugal) are grouped under this aesthetic category, which is characterized often by durational principles (Luca and Jorge 2015). Laleen Jayamanne, in her idiosyncratic style, considers aesthetic commonalities between the “poetic cinemas” of such auteurs as G. W. Pabst, Sergei Parajanov, Stanley Kubrick, and Raúl Ruiz and, in doing so, constructs a film-philosophical framework itself based on such non-Western schools of thought as Maori anthropology and Sufi philosophy (Jayamanne 2021). Jayamanne (2015) uses a similar framework beyond the Western film theoretical canon in her research on Kumar Shahani, who she compared with Parajanov. This unprecedented, unquestionably radical diversification of cinema and philosophy widens our understanding of the transnational and encourages readers to look beyond the Global North while locating/constructing their own film theory. It is perhaps no longer possible to explore cinemas made even in the Global North (or European art cinema) and the latter’s many waves without considering the Global South careers of the latter. Their global trajectory and movements, engagement with Global South cine-locations, reception in and impact on local industries, contribute to the transnational reshaping and rehabilitation of this cinema.[14]

In an increasingly totalitarian India where the political climate affects the cinematic scene and film pedagogy, the mode of resistance intimately associated with Global South cine-politics finds the “dead” European auteurs involved in their struggle. Ashish Rajadhyaksha refers to the 2015 student agitation and protests at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) where budding filmmakers clashed directly with the authoritarian Indian state and its right-wing politics that was systematically targeting the campus-nation, with Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Tarkovsky, and several other canonical auteurs resurfacing on the walls and in the sloganeering on the streets, as if “the cinema (and not just Indian cinema) had gone to war” (2023, 38). This is a clear instance of cinematic transnationalism’s resistance to dominant nationalisms.

Conclusion

This article proposes an exploration of the multiple possibilities that Global South cinema offers as a key framework in the larger context of cinema studies. It engages with the emerging contours of transnational cinema research, contributes to the political history archive of the long 1960s, and complements the efficacy of the Global South as a concept and mode of resistance to the neoliberal world order and authoritarian politics worldwide. With an emphasis on south-south cine-political associations that existed between India and Latin America, it refers also to possible cases where a new theoretical model in cinema studies can emerge, rejecting dominant Western models for the sake of an effective decolonization of the discipline.

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[1] For more on the conference, the American novelist Richard Wright's accounts of it might be consulted (Wright 1956). The Indonesian documents on the conference have recently been published in English translation and should be considered as a valuable source (Roberts and Foulcher 2016). For a critical book-length work on the conference, see Christopher J. Lee's edited volume on the phenomenon, its alignments, histories and afterlives (2010).

[2] Apart from the explicit Indo-Pak rivalry, China's attempt at gaining acceptability and the overall problems in identifying a common definition of imperialism for the postcolonial nations, Bandung Conference's impact also faced such global political challenges as the Suez crisis and the Soviet invasion of Hungary, both happening in 1956, a year after the event.

[3] For the contemporary literature devoted to film festival research, see Elsaesser (2005), Valck (2007), Valck, Kredell and Loist (2016), Valck and Damiens (2023). Visit the Film Festival Research Network (opens in a new tab) (FFRN) and the annotated festival studies bibliography (opens in a new tab) on the Oxford Bibliographies Online.

[4] For more on the Soviet's film policy related to curation (especially at the Tashkent festival in 1968 and after) and pedagogy, see Djagalov and Salazkina 2016; Djagalov 2020; Salazkina 2023.

[5] For detailed archival-historical information on the reception of Bombay popular cinema in the USSR, see Sudha Rajagopalan (2008).

[6] Film society magazines often featured festival reports and interviews with activists where such reliance on Eastern European cultural centres and diplomatic units has been emphasized on. Ram Halder, one of the most significant members of the Calcutta Film Society (CFS), recounts his memories of film society screenings. As it shows, a significant number of Russian, Hungarian, Czech and Polish films were shown (2022, 191-214). For a historian's account on the film society, see Rochona Majumdar (2021, 92-123).

[7] For more on the Del Tercer Mundo exhibition in Cuba, see María Berríos (2019, 107-27).

[8] Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's classic 1969 text 'Hacia un tercer cine'/ 'Toward a Third Cinema' that followed their film *La hora de los hornos* (*The Hour of the Furnaces*, 1968) initiated discussions around Third Cinema as opposed to the spectacle-driven Hollywood films and auteur-dominated European art cinema. Solanas and Getino continued to revisit their articles/arguments and published more. Julio García Espinosa's 'Por un cine imperfecto'/ 'For an Imperfect Cinema' appeared in the same year (1969). Such texts are considered as manifestos of radical cinema from the Third World.

[9] Mariano Mestman has published extensively on the 1974 Montreal conference devoted to Third Cinema. All the videotapes of the event have also been archived by his team of researchers at the Instituto Investigaciones Gino Germani, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Argentina (2013-14, 18-78).

[10] See Dennison and Lim 2006; Ezra and Rowden 2006; Durovicova and Newman 2010; Nagib, Perriam, and Dudrah 2011; Stam 2019.

[11] See Hunt and Wing-Fai 2008; Morris, Li, and Ching-Kiu 2006.

[12] An article by Ravi S. Vasudevan might be an instance here. In that article he offers the global history (or one of the many global histories) of Indian cinema (2010, 94-117). Vasudevan explores the fluidity of the Empire, cinematic forms before the nation-state and the film publics and audience spaces beyond the domain of the national.

[13] The aesthetic considerations might also be critiqued from a gendered perspective, the way Patricia White pointed out the hegemonic status within Nagib's decentering model, focusing more on global feminist filmmaking as a transnational countercinema (White 2015).

[14] Italian Neorealism's global trajectories have been researched from multiple perspectives, considering its impact on several other cinemas around the globe. At least two significant anthologies on the Italian film movement engaged with its impact on Indian, African and Latin American (mostly Brazilian and Argentine) cinemas (see Ruberto and Wilson 2007; Giovacchini and Sklar 2012). Similarly, the French New Wave and the New German Cinema affected cinematic/art cinema discourses in other geographies considerably.

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