Notes on “General Introduction: What is Transnational Cinema?” by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden (from Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader)

The last time I taught this class, folks groaned under the weight of reading and comprehending this scholarly article, so, this time, I’ve distilled some of its key concepts in these “Notes.” The concepts which follow come directly from the article. In this sienna-colored text, I explain or “unpack” some of their ideas or offer ways they will connect to films we watch together, but all the ideas are Ezra and Rowden’s (or the folks’ they quote).

By all means, read their article for yourselves, too, if you want to sink your teeth into it. It is not required reading at this point in the quarter.

What I hope you will take away from these notes is that “transnational cinema” is, in its largest sense, a complex way of thinking about movies— their production, their content, and their reach—in a global context. Let’s dive in!

The authors begin with a helpful definition: “...the transnational can be understood as the global forces that link people or institutions across nations” (1). One key word here is “across”—it suggests that national borders, literal and imagined, are easily permeated or transcended; for example, ideas, cultural products and practices, and social forces like banks and film festivals move through and across them all the time.

“The concept of transnationalism enables us to better understand the changing ways in which the contemporary world is being imagined by an increasing number of filmmakers across genres...” (1). Here I seize on “the contemporary world being imagined”—that’s what films do—they offer takes on our world(s) filtered through filmmakers’ cultural lenses and imaginations. I also attend to the term “across genres”: think of all those martial arts movies that began in Taiwan and China, infused filmmakers in the U.S. like Tarentino (see Kill Bill), and now often transcend nation-of-origin tags with joint financing, joint filmmaking, and ever-expanding international audiences.

On this notion of the increased “permeability of national borders,” Ezra and Rowden suggest several relevant causes, including “vast circulation of films enabled by technologies such as video, DVD, and new digital media, and the heightened accessibility of such technologies for both filmmakers and spectators” (1).

Another force they name in transnational cinema’s crossing of borders is Hollywood. “Since its ascendancy around the time of the First World War, the American film industry has systematically dominated all other film
cultures and modes of cinematic imagery, production, and reception” (2). Ezra and Rowden quote Ella Shohat and Robert Stam who suggest that from a transnational perspective, the term “Hollywood” stands as “a kind of shorthand for a massively industrial, ideologically reactionary, and stylistically conservative form of “dominant” cinema” (2).

Here’s how I explain and translate this: Hollywood’s film industry is a strictly for-profit industry with huge costs up front and, therefore, very few risks are taken to push or challenge conservative beliefs and status quo power structures. Just think about what a “big deal” it seemed to be for *Brokeback Mountain* to tell a love story between two “cowboys.” Well, most of us have known for a long time that gay and bisexual men can and do fall in love every day! And many if not most of us have some awareness of the bigotry and inequity gays, bisexuals, lesbians and others faced and still face in our society because of their sexual orientation. The fact that this mainstream film was met with such a lot of press and public discussion gives us an inkling of just how conservative Hollywood usually is with its dominant storylines and ideology.

Ezra and Rowden go on to discuss the *homogenizing effect* of Hollywood’s economic and production pressures: “[A] vision [of the world’s filmgoers as sensation-starved children] has created a situation in which the U.S. film industry has...committed itself to the production of empty and costly cinematic spectacles that, in order to maintain their mainstream inoffensiveness, must be subjected to increasingly thorough forms of cultural and ideological cleansing before being released into the global cinemascape” (2). This cultural and ideological cleansing means creating ever more homogeneous and indistinguishable depictions of the world, its stories, and its peoples. We homogenize milk to remove potentially irritating ingredients so all can easily digest it with no moments of discomfort...same with homogenized film. (I appreciate the term cinemascape—it helps me visualize the abstract “space” which film creates and in which it travels.)

Here comes a both/and moment of thinking, though:

“But although mainstream Hollywood’s key role in U.S. cultural imperialism [its far-reaching homogenizing effect] cannot be ignored, it is also important to recognize the impossibility of maintaining a strict dichotomy between Hollywood cinema and its ‘others’ ” (2). In fact, just as I suggested above with martial arts movies crossing borders back and forth, Ezra and Rowden want us to think about *hybridity* when we think transnationally about film. Hollywood, too, is influenced by filmmakers and film industries around the world. It’s a both/and, back and forth, kind of thing.
However, Ezra and Rowden aren't inviting us to think about transnational cinema as a utopian state of universal human experiences and of universally accessible creative endeavors.

Instead of being immediately accessible to any and all viewers, they claim, “transnational cinema imagines its audiences as consisting of viewers who have expectations and types of cinematic literacy that go beyond the desire for and mindlessly appreciative consumption of national narratives that audiences can identify as their ‘own’” (3). So transnational cinema as a concept also refers to the ways films are received, interpreted, appreciated, as well as the ways they are made. Ezra and Rowden identify a kind of cosmopolitan viewer who moves through the transnational cinemascape with a savvy and still curious geopolitical and stylistic lens. As the quarter progresses, let’s keep tabs on what all cinematic literacy might mean and include.

Ezra and Rowden acknowledge that “each film requires a particular...referential framework in order to be fully readable,” but suggest that “increasingly these frameworks are losing the national and cultural particularity they once had” (4). Some of the films we watch will require more understanding of the cultural framework—the sets of underlying assumptions—woven into the characterizations, storylines, and themes. Turtles Can Fly, in particular, requires our patience and our curiosity as the film slowly reveals the wide-ranging forces at work in these characters’ lives.

Ezra and Rowden also offer this way of considering or “visualizing” the transnational cinemascape: “Transnational cinema arises at the interstices between the global and the local” (4). Interstices are small spaces between things set closely together. This notion of interstices helps me think of films as growing out of particular and complex intersections—each film a singular intersection of intellectual, cultural, political, and aesthetic elements of both individual vision and global influence. Miyazaki’s films like Spirited Away grow in part from interstices between “local” anime and this storytelling mode gone “global.” His films pull from “local” legacies of Japanese folk tale and religion(s) and from his own personal concerns about environmental decimation and spiritual erosion spawned by industrialization. They now speak “globally” to viewers around the world. From such interstices a transnational film phenomenon is born!

Another useful claim Ezra and Rowden make is this: “Ultimately, the conceptual force of a term like transnationalism is determined by a number of factors, ranging from the permeability of national borders (itself determined by local and global political and economic conditions) to the physical or virtual [via technology] mobility of those who cross them....To a large extent, cinematic mobility, like human mobility, is determined by
geopolitical factors and financial pedigree [funding]” (5) A quick case in point: Iran, as a geopolitical entity and nation-state, funds and controls its nationally produced films. So a film like Blackboards, by state-approved filmmaker Samira Makhmalbaf, reaches international film festivals via this state funding and state sanction and receives international audiences and perhaps awards. And yet...some Iranian folks living outside (or even inside) Iran, might tell you, as my acutely political friend Ali did, that the film doesn’t actually say much of anything.

Films are always political, even in their apparent absence of politics...which brings us to another concept that Ezra and Rowden introduce, that of film as a “destabilizing force.”

“It was this technology [the VCR] that lay [sic] the groundwork for the emergence of transnational cinema as the destabilizing force that it has become by providing what we can retrospectively recognize as a low-tech precursor to the genuinely revolutionary impact of digital video production, projection, and reproduction” [...] Digital technology...has enable a growing disregard for national boundaries and ideological and aesthetic checkpoints [...] and has functioned to disrupt and decentralize the forces that have, heretofore, maintained strict control over the representational politics of the cinematic public sphere” (6).

In other words, now that more people within and between cultures and countries can make and see more kinds of films made by one another, it’s much harder for nation-states and other kinds of institutions that maintain the status quo (within and between borders) to control the depictions of people and their potential and possibilities. Many more people have much more access to a wider range of ideas and ideologies about what’s possible—a potentially destabilizing force, indeed!

One more distinction Ezra and Rowden make is between Third Cinema and Third World Cinema. Third Cinema refers to films from the later 20th C made in “emerging” nations in Africa and Latin America to politicize these peoples’ and nations’ struggles with colonization and postcolonial legacies. The term Third Cinema quickly devolved into the more generic and freighted term Third World Cinema which evokes tired and highly limiting images of underdeveloped people in underdeveloped nations. Hence Ezra and Rowden recommend the term transnational cinema instead.

We will return to Ezra and Rowden’s General Introduction section called “Motion Pictures: Film, Migration and Diaspora” when we begin Session III. It will support our viewing and discussion of both Deepa Metha’s film Water and Bride and Prejudice by Gurinder Chadha. Both of these filmmakers now live and work outside their original homeland of India.
In the meantime, to prepare for the discussion forum on these “Notes,” identify a couple of terms or concepts you want to be sure to keep in mind as we move through our work this quarter.