Deconstructing and Reconstructing ‘Transnational Cinema’

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The notion of the transnational in Film Studies has developed in response to an increasing awareness of the limitations of conceptualising film in terms of national cinemas, and an acknowledgement of the changing nature of film production and distribution as a part of wider patterns of globalisation.¹ Transnational exchanges have long been central to filmmaking in terms of funding and the cast and crew,² and an increasing numbers of films in the international market cannot be identified with a single nation, with many films shooting in a number of countries, relying on a multinational cast and crew, and funded by a range of production companies. The concept of the transnational has seemed a straightforward solution for dealing with the problems inherent in the ‘national cinema’ label; however, what does the term actually mean? Which films can be categorised as transnational and which cannot? Does the term refer to production, distribution and exhibition, themes explored, aesthetics, nationalities of cast and crew, audience reception, or a range of these? Are mainstream Hollywood films transnational as they are distributed throughout the developed world? What about films with smaller budgets made in other national contexts that challenge Hollywood domination and

¹ I would like to thank Paul McDonald for his helpful comments on a draft of this paper.
explore the damaging effects of globalisation? Is the term ‘national’ now entirely bankrupt, and if so what does this mean for films that engage with specifically local issues? Once we begin to ask these sorts of questions it becomes clear that ‘transnational cinema’ as a catch-all is inadequate to deal with the complexities of categorising both actual films and industrial practices.

This chapter seeks to bring together the work of a number of film theorists in order to consider aspects of transnational film cultures that are often taken in isolation. I then apply their findings, where possible, to my own area of expertise, Latin American cinema, and more specifically to the work of contemporary ‘Mexican’ directors, Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo del Toro, and, to a lesser degree, Carlos Reygadas. They will act both as case studies for the theories developed, and illustrate new approaches needed in the theorising of ‘transnational cinema’. My aim in this chapter is to deconstruct the label and identify specific categories to help prevent the vagueness and confluations that the use of the term appears to invite.

A background to the term ‘Transnational’ in Film Studies

The need to question previous assumptions about the division of film criticism into neat national groupings has been gathering pace, as it is increasingly acknowledged that cinema is a part of the process of cultural exchange and is characterised by hybridity and its relationships with other markets. This approach characterises a collection of essays contained

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3 For an overview of what transnational has come to mean in other disciplines, see Steven Vertovec, ‘Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22.2 (1999), 447–62. Vertovec usefully outlines categories to which concepts of transnationalism have been applied: these include social morphology, a type of consciousness, a mode of cultural reproduction, an avenue of capital, a site of political engagement, and a reconstruction of ‘place’ or locality, p. 447.


within *Cinema and Nation* edited by Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie. One of the key essays to introduce the concept of the transnational into Film Studies was Andrew Higson’s ‘The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema’. In this study Higson questions the relationship between film cultures and the nation state, arguing that

> the concept of national cinema is hardly able to do justice either to the internal diversity of contemporary cultural formations or to the overlaps and interpenetrations between different formations.  

This problem is resolved by having ‘transnational’ replace ‘national’ as a new conceptual framework within which to examine film cultures: “‘transnational’ may be a subtler means of describing cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained by national boundaries’.  

Following Higson, it has become increasingly popular to use the term ‘transnational’ in writings on film to show an awareness of the problems with the use of the ‘national’; however, it has often been used without any definition or explanation as to what is meant.  

Higson uses the essay to introduce the concept, and as such his essay does not attempt an exhaustive definition of what is meant by this. That said, he does explain that in the migration between ‘leaky borders’ ‘the transnational emerges’ (Higson, p. 67), and identifies production, mixed casts and crews, and distribution and reception as sites for its location (pp. 67–8). His work has


7 Higson, ‘The Limiting Imagination’, p. 64. Many other film and cultural critics have made similar criticisms of monolithic notions of the nation; in the same vein, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in the introduction to their edited book argue the following: ‘the global nature of the colonizing process, and the global reach of the contemporary media, virtually oblige the cultural critic to move beyond the restrictive frameworks of monoculture and the individual nation-state’, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (eds), *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), p. 1.

8 There has been some recent excellent work which has furthered the field of transnational film theory: this includes Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim’s, ‘Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies’, *Transnational Cinemas*, 1.1 (2010), 7–21, and Chris Berry’s ‘What is Transnational Cinema? Thinking from the Chinese Situation’, *Transnational Cinemas*, 1.2 (2010), 111–27.
been an important stepping stone from which other writings are implicitly invited to follow, while he himself has developed his ideas elsewhere.9

There are, however, some difficulties inherent in the very task of attempting to provide a definition for the term ‘transnational cinema’. One example of this can be found in an important chapter written by Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden as an introduction to their book, Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader (pp. 1–12). This piece demonstrates some of the problems with meanings given to the term. While it contains many excellent points and is a useful overview of many contemporary debates, the flaw lies in an attempt to assume an essence to ‘transnational cinema’. This is demonstrated in the title itself ‘What is Transnational Cinema?’ In their introduction to the edited book Remapping World Cinemas: Identity, Culture and Politics in Film, Dennison and Lim have argued that the question ‘what is world cinema?’ has an essentialist element built into it.10 I would argue that the same criticism can be made of any attempt to provide a definition of transnational cinema.

While much of Ezra and Rowden’s essay makes some very interesting points about the debates relating to concepts of the transnational in film, they rarely answer their own question posed in the title. When they do attempt to do this, the problems built into the question become most apparent. They first get into difficulties when providing an all-encompassing explanation of the term:

The transnational comprises both globalization – in cinematic terms, Hollywood’s domination of world film markets – and the counter-hegemonic responses of filmmakers from former colonial and Third World countries. (Ezra and Rowden, p. 1)

This seems to suggest that when we speak of transnational cinema we are talking about almost every film, both those on international release, and those which are marginalised from the global market, as long as they challenge Hollywood filmmaking approaches. Following this over-generalised definition, they make a case for a type of cinema that they see as being transnational. For the authors this is constituted by films that focus on migration and diaspora as themes (Ezra and Rowden, p. 7), and are


located in the ‘in-between spaces of culture’ (p. 4). ‘More often than not … [there is a] narrative dynamic […] generated by a sense of loss’ (p. 7), with a focus on displaced persons, seen through ‘cinematic depictions of people caught in the cracks of globalization’ (p. 7). The authors here demonstrate a degree of voluntarism; the politically important films informed by post-colonial fallout to which they make reference are those that they want to privilege as transnational film texts, while this voluntarism negates the earlier generalised definition provided. Perhaps what this critical reading reveals is that the term ‘transnational cinema’ is lacking in specific meaning in that discrete concepts have been conflated: it does not define an aesthetic approach, a movement of filmmakers, any specific national grouping, and neither does it separate out areas of study.

**Categories of the transnational**

In order to re-inject meaning into an emerging field that we can call transnational cinema studies, it is helpful to define key concepts, and develop meaningful categories. Such an approach has been taken by Mette Hjort in her chapter ‘On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism’. In this piece, Hjort also identifies a problem with the use of the term ‘transnational’ in that it ‘does little to advance our thinking about important issues if it can mean anything and everything that the occasion would appear to demand’. Her solution is to produce a ‘detailed typology that links the concept of transnationalism to different models of cinematic production, each motivated by specific concerns and designed to achieve particular effects’ (Hjort, p. 15).

This focus on production contexts is extremely useful; I take a similar approach in this chapter, but tease out separate strands that have been conflated in the umbrella term in an attempt to distinguish between industrial practices, working practices, aesthetics, themes and approaches, audience reception, ethical questions, and critical reception. I argue that

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12 These categories are made up of ‘epiphanic transnationalism, affinitive transnationalism, milieu building transnationalism, opportunistic transnationalism, cosmopolitan transnationalism, globalizing transnationalism, auteurist transnationalism, modernizing transnationalism, and experimental transnationalism’. See Hjort, ‘On the Plurality’, pp. 15–30 for further explanation of these.
if we apply a series of categories to our readings of films, we can avoid the problems detailed above. I suggest the following 15 groupings:

- transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition
- transnational modes of narration
- cinema of globalisation
- films with multiple locations
- exilic and diasporic filmmaking
- film and cultural exchange
- transnational influences
- transnational critical approaches
- transnational viewing practices
- transregional/transcommunity films
- transnational stars
- transnational directors
- the ethics of transnationalism
- transnational collaborative networks
- national films

These are clearly not self-contained categories and there is a good degree of overlap between them. Indeed, in some cases most of the above can be applied to a single film text; in others, several can be applied. Even in the case of national films there is inevitably a degree of cultural exchange in terms of influence from other filmmaking traditions. While these categories are not original in themselves, they have not, to my knowledge, been taken together in an attempt to provide a fuller understanding of transnational cinema cultures.

Transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition
This category relates to financial questions: funding for filmmaking through co-productions; the question of niche markets; the policies of distribution and exhibition companies, and the marketing of films to global audiences. In my analysis of this category I assume hegemonic power

13 Since formulating this list, one of the gaps that emerged in the writing of the book *The Three Amigos: The Transnational Filmmaking of Guillermo del Toro, Alejandro González Iñárritu, and Alfonso Cuarón* is another category, ‘the politics of the transnational’, needed to address the political discourses into which global films are inserted, and the relationship between these and the production and distribution companies that finance them; see Shaw, *The Three Amigos*. 
structures that favour Hollywood’s domination of many film markets. Nevertheless, the notion of global Hollywood also rests on the fact that, ‘Hollywood’s links to any specific national context have become strained’ (McDonald and Wasko, p. 6). This relates to international distribution and exhibition operations, co-productions and co-financing agreements with other national territories (McDonald and Wasko, p. 6), foreign ownership of many of the major studios, and the employment of successful directors, crew and cast from other nations. The last point is well illustrated by the three best known Mexican directors, Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro, who have cultivated an auteur status to gain entry into the Hollywood film industry.

This category clearly links finance with content, as the result of transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition are films that enter the international market. Latin America provides a wealth of examples of ‘national’ films entering the international market. Some of these include the Brazilian films *Cidade de Deus* (City of God, Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002), *Tropa de elite* (Elite Squad, José Padilha, 2007), *Central do Brasil* (Central Station, Walter Salles, 1998); the Mexican films, *Amores perros* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001); and the Argentine *Nueve reinas* (Nine Queens, Fabián Bielinsky, 2000), *La niña santa* (The Holy Girl, Lucrecia Martel, 2004), *La mujer sin cabeza* (The Headless Woman, Lucrecia Martel, 2008), and *XXY* (Lucía Puenzo, 2007). Central to the success of an unprecedented number of Latin American films and those from other national territories is the increased forms in which films can enter the international market. While there may be very little opportunity to buy a ticket to see non-English language films for those who do not live in big cities, world movie channels on digital television, and DVD internet rental companies have provided consumers with much greater access to foreign films.

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Transnational modes of narration
This category relates to the content of films and the cinematic storytelling devices used that make them accessible to audiences in many parts of the world (although of course, different readings of these are produced depending on the national identities of audiences, among other factors). This category can refer to approaches used in mainstream Hollywood movies, and those used in films that combine local traditions with Hollywood influences to produce spectacular, big-budget features. These include recent highly successful Chinese language films such as Hero (Zimou Zang, 2002), Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Ang Lee, 2000) and House of the Flying Daggers (Zimou Zang, 2004). Mette Hjort refers to these Chinese language films as ‘globalizing transnational films’ in the way that they combine high production values, generic ingredients and internationally recognised stars in their bid to secure international audiences (Hjort, ‘On the Plurality’, pp. 21–2). Song Hwee Lim and Will Higbee, in turn, note that: ‘from action thrillers to horror films, East Asian cinemas have excited critics who marvel at their ability to beat Hollywood “at its own game”’ (Higbee and Lim, p. 15).

Examples of Mexican application of transnational modes of narration can be seen in films such as Amores perros and Y tu mamá también, among others. González Iñárritu and team, for instance, adopt contemporary international filmmaking trends in terms of structure, chronology, characterisation, editing and camera work in Amores perros, their first international hit. However, we can also apply the concept of niche markets to this category as ‘transnational modes of narration’ does not only refer to the most commercial films with mass appeal, but can also be used with reference to cult films or art cinema. The works of the Mexican director Carlos Reygadas provide a good example of the broader application of this category as he makes films that use an internationally recognised film language by following certain art cinema conventions and borrowing from, among others, Andrei Tarkovsky, Carl Theodor Dreyer and Abbas Kiarostami.

Cinema of globalisation
The reference here is to film texts that explicitly address questions of globalisation within their narratives, central to which are the ways in which relations of power between nations and peoples are played out on screen. This term is used by Tom Zaniello who has compiled a guide to ‘films about the new economic order’, as the book’s subheading tells
His focus is on films from around the world ‘about transnational organisations’ and ‘multinational corporations’ and their effects on people and the environment (Zaniello, p. 17). Zaniello casts his net wide and his book covers 213 films with many documentaries included. My focus here is on feature films (which is not to diminish the value of documentaries) and a few important films that can be included in this category are: The Voyage (Solanas, 1992), Dirty Pretty Things (Frears, 2002), In This World (Winterbottom, 2002), The Constant Gardener (Meirelles, 2005), Syriana (Gaghan, 2005) Blood Diamond (Zwick, 2006), The International (Twyker, 2009); and from Mexican directors: Children of Men (Cuarón, 2006) and Babel (González Iñárritu, 2006).

**Films with multiple locations**

Most examples of the ‘cinema of globalisation’ are also ‘films with multiple locations’; however, the use of a number of geographical sites does not necessarily equate with cinema of globalisation. Borders crossings are frequently instrumental in terms of plot and aesthetics, and depend for commercial success on harnessing a tourist gaze; nevertheless, they are often not used predominantly to make social and political points about the nature of globalisation. Such films include, among many others, the James Bond films, and the Bourne franchise: The Bourne Identity (Liman, 2002); The Bourne Supremacy (Greengrass, 2004); The Bourne Ultimatum (Greengrass, 2007) and The Bourne Legacy (Gilroy, 2012). While the latter critique rogue elements within the CIA, they do not take on multinational corporations in the way that the above-mentioned films do, and they are first and foremost action-adventure films that use locations to provide exotic backdrops, while the practices of the CIA are used for their narrative potential rather than to make serious social commentary.

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17 His specific categories are: ‘films about global labor and labor unions affected by globalization; films about global capital and multinational corporations; films about the transnational organizations (WB, IMF, WTO) most closely identified with globalization and global capital; films about labor history and the daily life of working-class people as they relate to the development of globalization; films about the environment directly related to changes in labor or capital; and films about changes in both the workplace and the corporate office in the era of multinational corporations’ (Zaniello, p.17).
Exilic and diasporic filmmaking

This kind of filmmaking has been foregrounded in the work of Hamid Naficy (2001), who has labelled it ‘Accented Cinema’. He uses the term to refer to the products of displaced filmmakers: those who explore their experiences of exile and emigration in their work.\(^\text{18}\) For Naficy, these filmmakers ‘work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices’,\(^\text{19}\) and are generally outside of the dominant modes of production (Naficy, ‘Situating Accented Cinema’, p. 111). In his book he considers the strategies used by such filmmakers to produce a form of personal counter cinema (Naficy, \textit{An Accented Cinema}, pp. 6–7). Those whose films he studies and analyses include Atom Egoyan, Mira Nair, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Ghasem Ebrahimian, Fernando Solanas, Chantal Akerman and Emir Kusturica, to name a few.\(^\text{20}\)

In the case of Latin America, this category is useful when considering a previous generation of filmmakers from Southern cone countries during the years of dictatorship. Directors include the Argentine Fernando Solanas, who made films in France; and the Chileans Raúl Ruiz, who also went into exile in France, and Miguel Littín, who went to Mexico. However, the main type of exile that can be applied to the current generation of filmmakers is economic exile, with bigger budgets luring the Brazilian directors Walter Salles and Fernando Meirelles, and the Mexicans Cuarón, Iñárritu and del Toro to other national territories, predominantly the USA, to further their careers. It should be noted, nonetheless, that Iñárritu and del Toro have spoken of their fears of kidnap and partially attributed their ‘exile’ to this; indeed, del Toro’s father was kidnapped.\(^\text{21}\)

Cultural Exchange

This clearly connects with ideas associated with ‘cultural exchange’, which frequently characterise such interactions. The term is taken here from Tom O’Regan who uses it to refer to a wide range of systems and


\(^{20}\) In a related vein, Tim Bergfelder has made a strong case for the centrality of exile and immigration in European cinema: see Tim Bergfelder, ‘National, Transnational, Or Supranational Cinema? Rethinking European Film Studies’, \textit{Media, Culture and Society}, 27.3 (2005), 315–31.

processes that underpin the transnational nature of cinema. For O’Regan ‘cultural exchange can be found in filmmaking and film criticism, film reception, and film marketing’ (O’Regan, p. 262), and involves the circulation of ‘cultural materials from one filmmaking and cultural tradition to another’ (p. 262), with materials in his formulation including texts (p. 262), concepts (p. 263), filmmaking practices (p. 264), reception, critical approaches, personnel, (p. 265), ‘technologies of exhibition, production and marketing’ (p. 265), and exhibition venues (p. 266).

While there are, then, many examples of cultural exchange, one of the most obvious can be found in film texts that do not clearly fit into a single geographical grouping due to an array of national identities of cast, crew, writers, production companies, shooting locations and settings. There are multiple examples of films that fit within this category; some of the best known include Lars von Trier’s Breaking the Waves (1996), and Dancer in the Dark (2000); The Others (2001) by the Spanish director Alejandro Aménabar, In This World directed by Michael Winterbottom (2002), Michael Haneke’s Hidden (2005), and Slumdog Millionaire (2009) directed by Danny Boyle.

The work of Cuarón, González Iñárritu and del Toro also involves many levels of cultural exchange. Their films have been shot by their own cinematographers, even when employed on Hollywood projects (Cuarón’s regular cinematographer is Emmanuel Lubezki; Iñárritu has always worked with Rodrigo Prieto, and del Toro’s cinematographer is Guillermo Navarro). They have all benefitted from working in a number of locations, with multinational casts and crew, and they have made films in Spanish and English, while securing funding from a range of Hollywood, US independent, Mexican and Spanish companies. One of the best examples of cultural exchange is seen in Babel, directed by González Iñárritu. The cast and crew included Mexicans, Italians, French, North Americans and Moroccans, and it was shot in the USA, Japan, Morocco and Mexico, and features five languages (English, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic and Berber).

22 O’Regan, ‘Cultural Exchange’.
23 Despite the fact that Hidden was considered one of the best ‘foreign’ language films of 2006, it did not make the Oscar nominations as the rules for the academy awards stipulate that the director, cast and language used should be from the same country. Haneke is an Austrian director, and the film is in French and stars Juliette Binoche and Daniel Auteuil. This illustrates the fact that Hollywood has not yet successfully dealt with the complexities of how to categorise films with a multinational cast and crew.
Transnational critical approaches and Transnational Influences

Another form of cultural exchange can be found in ‘Transnational critical approaches’ and ‘Transnational influences’ which I examine together here as the methodology developed in the former allows a heightened awareness of the latter. These categories assume intertextuality in that every film made has been consciously or unconsciously shaped by pre-existing cultural products from all over the world. This, in turn, also infers that national cinema cannot exist in isolation, and here we can apply Dudley Andrew’s notion of a world systems approach. In his words:

You can’t study a single film, nor even a national cinema, without understanding the interdependence of images, entertainment, and people all of which move with increasing regularity around the world. The movies are a model for ‘the glocal’.24

Andrews applies the analogy of genealogical trees to traditional studies of national cinema in the ways that scholars have examined each nation’s cinema as a discrete object of study, arguing that ‘their elaborate root and branch structures seldom interfere with one another’ (Andrew, p. 21). He critiques this methodology and advocates the use of the concept of waves to replace that of trees. A world systems approach is characterised, then, by waves of influence between national cinemas and from film to film in terms of approach, narrative and visual style.25

His insights necessitate a new approach to any study of ‘national’ cinemas and directors. To turn once again to Mexican examples, this way of thinking ensures that more sophisticated answers are given to the questions relating to degrees of ‘Mexicanness’ of leading directors born in that country. Some may argue that Carlos Reygadas is more Mexican in his filmmaking than Guillermo del Toro. On the surface, this may appear to be the case because the former has shot his films exclusively in Mexico, and works within specific national locations, while the latter has not made a film in Mexico since Cronos (1993). Yet, this is made more complex by the fact that Reygadas’ influences are unapologetically from international

masters of cinema, as has been seen (as are del Toro’s), while the latter is working hard to promote filmmaking opportunities in Mexico.

**Transnational viewing practices**

These are central to any discussion of influences and critical approaches, as well as to all of the other categories. They can be sub-divided into three key concepts. The most obvious refers to the viewing of any film made and/or set in a different national context from that of the audience, and the divergent readings that may arise from the national/regional identities of audiences.26 The second relates to ‘structures of cinematic experience’, to use Charles Acland’s term.27 Acland argues that megaplexes create a form of popular cosmopolitanism that has its own structures of feeling (Acland, p. 237) and ‘arrange a localized encounter with a transnational commercial film culture’ (p. 239), which creates a cosmopolitan spectator within a specific atmosphere of social life (p. 240). Shared practices of cinema-going unite cinema spectators around the world and seek emotional responses encouraged through the marketing of films according to generic markers. Nevertheless, as the first concept makes clear, local factors will ensure tensions between specific local responses and ‘felt internationalism’.28

The third concept refers to the fact that different sectors of the community will seek out films from cultures with which they identify. To give a few examples, Latino communities in the USA are more likely to see Latin American films than Anglo communities. They will also seek out films made by Hispanic directors or starring Hispanic actors.29 Bollywood films are extremely popular with Indian immigrant communities (among

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28 Acland’s thesis is rather weakened by the fact that he concentrates on cinema institutions and ignores textual matters, and his fascinating idea about felt internationalism does not fully consider how national audiences may read a text differently, regardless of the shared cinematic experience provided by the megaplexes.

others) in a range of national locations. Likewise, mass-produced Nigerian films are popular with Nigerian immigrant communities around the world (Andrew, p. 26). These phenomena have led to alternative modes of distribution with the circulation of videos and DVDs in specialist shops often bypassing the cinema distribution circuits. Transnational viewing practices draw our attention to the fact that there are many forms in which films cross borders, with film a central part of an informal economy.

**Transregional/transcommunity films**

There is some overlap here as these categories refer to the films themselves that are distributed and well known to those within a region or diasporic populations, but not globally. Thus, there are films that are known by Chinese-language communities, Hindi speakers, or Hispanics to give three examples, but not to other members of the international cinema-going public. Likewise, gay and lesbian audiences may form a community of viewers and are likely to be aware of films from around the world that straight audiences may be ignorant of.

**Transnational stars**

These can also be broken down into transregional, transcommunity or global stars. While Brad Pitt and George Clooney may be known throughout most of the developed world and beyond, Shah Rukh Khan and Amitabh Bachan are transregional and transcommunity Bollywood stars; household names in India and Pakistan, but known to few outside of the South Asian community in the United States and Europe. Transnational stars from the Hispanic community include the Spaniards Penelope Cruz, Antonio Banderas, Javier Bardem, and the Mexicans Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna. While they have appeared in a number of ‘national’ films that been internationally distributed, they have reached the heights of global fame via their appearance in Hollywood feature films.

**Transnational directors**

This is clearly a category that overlaps with many of the above in that, for instance, the filmmakers need to be fluent in transnational modes of narration, and are physical embodiments of cultural exchange. In broad terms, it refers to directors who work and seek funding in a range of national

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contexts, while they have their films distributed in the global market. An early example of such a director is Luis Buñuel; other more contemporary examples include Lars von Trier, Michael Haneke, Alejandro Amenábar, Ang Lee, Fernando Meirelles, Walter Salles and Baz Lurhmann.

Cuarón, Iñárritu and del Toro clearly belong in this category, as a brief glance at their trajectories reveal. Following Cuarón’s first Mexican feature, *Solo con tu pareja/Love in the Time of Hysteria* (1991), he made *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998), both of which are entirely US funded. After returning to Mexico to make *Y tu mamá también*, released in 2001, Cuarón moved to English territory with *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (USA, UK, 2004) and *Children of Men* (USA, UK, 2006), with the majority of the funding coming from US production companies. Del Toro relocated to Spain to make *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001), thanks to the promise of money from the Almodóvar brothers’ production company, El Deseo, although the Mexican company Anhelo Producciones and del Toro’s production company the Tequila Gang co-produced the film. There was a similarly complex funding arrangement between Spanish and Mexican companies for *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), also rooted deeply within a Spanish historical context, with a predominantly Spanish cast. Del Toro is equally well-known for his Hollywood commercial productions, *Mimic* (1997), *Blade II* (2002), *Hellboy* (2004), and *Hellboy II The Golden Army* (2008). Like his compatriots, Iñárritu has also moved out of Mexico following his first successful ‘national’ film. Following *Amores Perros* he made an independent US feature *21 Grams* (2003), set and filmed in Memphis, before relocating to the multinational spaces of *Babel* (2006).

Cuarón, del Toro and Iñárritu make us question traditional ideas about the ‘auteur’ as representative and bearer of national and/or ethnic identity’ (Ezra and Rowden, p. 3) in their movements across geographical borders. The fact that the three directors, between them, have set their films in the USA, the UK, Morocco, Japan, and Spain has meant that the Mexican auteurist director is no longer perceived as an allegorical voice of the nation, as was previously the case.

The ethics of transnationalism
This area of study has been the focus of recent work by Mette Hjort, who has added a much needed ethical dimension to writings on transnational film. In her article, ‘On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism’, she notes:
There is nothing inherently virtuous about transnationalism and there may even be reason to object to some forms of transnationalism […]. My own view is that the more valuable forms of cinematic transnationalism feature at least two qualities: a resistance to globalization as cultural homogenization; and a commitment to ensuring that certain economic realities associated with filmmaking do not eclipse the pursuit of aesthetic, artistic, social, and political values.

(Hjort, ‘On the Plurality’, p. 15)

Her focus is on a form of ‘milieu-building transnationalism’ which involves collaborations between filmmakers of small nations as the best way to achieve this. A clear example of this would be the way Cuarón, Iñárritu and del Toro have forged links and worked together in order to be able to foster a Mexican filmmaking culture, and to balance artistic and moral integrity with the realities of Hollywood domination. They have played a strategic game and have succeeded in making personal projects alongside or even as a part of Hollywood productions. Questions of artistic integrity are more complex than at first they appear, and a decision to make a ‘Hollywood’ film does not mean a loss of quality.

Rather than accuse the filmmakers of betraying their Mexican identity through their recent work, it is more fruitful to frame the debate around questions of power. As Tom O’Regan has noted in his essay on cultural exchange, cinema generates institutions built on unequal power relations:

The international industry is both dominant and predatory. It is predatory in that it is naturally expansive. It seeks new personnel for its productions with the result that many talented directors are lost from the national context in which they began. (O’Regan, p. 269)

Transnational modes of production, distribution and exhibition open up the field for many individual directors, and a few films from non-English speaking national contexts, but they do not threaten US hegemony. Despite its transnational reach, the US dominated global system will only ever accommodate a handful of non-English language films at any one time, and individual Mexican directors have chosen to travel in and out of its systems to varying degrees as they want to make films that will consistently secure international releases and consolidate their status.

31 Hjort is referring specifically to Advance Party, von Trier’s project in which his plans to shoot three films in Scotland create opportunities for Scottish filmmaking.
as star directors. In ethical terms, then, what needs to be addressed is not whether individual directors feel compelled to work in the USA or Europe, but how can nationally produced films survive in a Hollywood dominated market.

Transnational collaborative networks
As we have seen, these can take the form of partnerships between small nations to enable a resistance to (US dominated) globalisation in filmmaking. The category can apply more broadly to any form of cross-border collaborations among filmmakers to generate the production of films. Another effective technique is demonstrated in a strategy used by our three directors, along with Carlos Cuarón and Rodrigo García. The five have formed a production partnership company, Cha cha chá, and touted for business among major Hollywood Studios to guarantee funding for future projects. The company has cannily employed media generated notions of the three star directors, ‘the three amigos’, to generate interest. They were taken up by Universal Pictures and its specialty branch Focus Features in a deal which provides a collective budget of $100 million for a five film package, guaranteeing the filmmakers creative control.

Thus, national identity has been used to help further Mexican film culture, sustained by a mixture of US and Mexican funding. What is most noteworthy is that arrangements like this one entirely disrupt traditional debates about cultural imperialism as in this case, it is US money that is helping to create independent and financially viable films by Mexican directors, with, of course, the promise of healthy returns at the box office. This is not to say that the power imbalances and ideological controls theorised by critics of cultural imperialism are not as relevant today as they

32 García is a successful television and film director and son of the well known novelist Gabriel García Márquez.
33 Peter Knegt, ‘CANNES ‘07 | Cuaron, Del Toro, and Inarritu Form ‘cha cha cha’; Trio Ink 5 Film Pact With Universal/Focus’ (18 May 2007). Available at: http://www.indiewire.com/article/cannes_07_cuaron_del_toro_and_inarritu_form_cha_cha_cha_trio_ink_5_film_pac/. (Last accessed 1 July 2010). See also Adam Dawtrey, ‘Universal pacts with Mexican trio Cuaron, del Toro, Inarritu to make five pics’ (18 May 2007). Available at: http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=cannes2007&jump=story&articleid=VR1117965227. (Last accessed 5 July 2010). One film, Rudo y Cursi (Rough and Corny) was released in 2008 in Mexico. It is directed by Carlos Cuaron, and stars Gael García Bernal and Diego Luna. It has been described as a comedy that shares similar characteristics with Y Tu Mamá También, and it tells the adventures of two half brothers who escape from their life working on a banana plantation through their success as footballers.
always have been, but there are new power configurations, and individual filmmakers are learning to play systems to their advantage.

**National Films**

I would like to end with this category as it is important to remember that much film production is made for domestic markets, focuses on specifically local issues, and relies on modes of narration that may not appeal to international audiences. Academics and international audiences often have little awareness of large sectors of the world’s film production, precisely because it is not transnational. At a recent talk at the University of Portsmouth the Oscar-winning young South African director and writer Tristan Holmes observed that some of most successful films in his country among the white population are conservative and patriarchal cinematic texts made for Afrikaner audiences, with these films unknown in international film circles. Likewise, specific political circumstances may ensure that films are not distributed overseas; for instance, North Korean propagandist films are also only made for a national population, and due both to the isolated and closed nature of the regime and the nature of the films themselves, are not part of any international distribution networks.

In the case of Mexico, despite much talk of a New Wave of filmmaking and the emergence of high-profile filmmakers, much of the national cinematic culture does not reach foreign audiences. Few non-Mexicans beyond a minority of aficionados will be aware of the 200 movies featuring masked wrestlers (luchadores) popular from the late 1950s until the mid-1970s. They are also probably unaware of the number of domestically successful romantic comedies, the critically acclaimed work of a generation of women directors, and the rise in films dealing with the historical roots of Mexican national identity. These are examples of national films,

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34 Tristan Holmes’ film Elalini won the award for the Best Foreign Film in the 2006 Student Academy Awards. His talk at the University of Portsmouth took place on 25 February 2009.

35 For more information on North Korean film culture, see Hyangjin Lee, *Contemporary Korean Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). I am grateful to Ruth Doughty for this source.


37 For an overview of these trends, see Miriam Haddu, ‘The Power of Looking: Politics and The Gaze in Salvador Carrasco’s *La otra conquista/The Other Conquest*, in
that do have some transregional and transcommunity reach, but have very limited international distribution.

All films are to a degree national, and there does not have to be conflict between the terms ‘national and ‘transnational’; that is, there is a link between national identities and storytelling at the heart of cinema, even when we take on board all the nuances and questioning of the national that transnational critical approaches have brought. Film may not be able to provide access to the truth of a nation, yet there is no film that does not have something to say about the discursive and mythical construction of national identities. As Shohat and Stam write, ‘contemporary theory sees nations as narrated, in the sense that beliefs about the origins and evolution of nations crystallize in the forms of stories’ (‘Introduction’, p. 9). What can perhaps be added is that there is a transnational element built into the national, as ‘origins and evolutions’ are characterised by intertextual influences and border crossings on many levels, as the above categories have demonstrated.

The above categories alert us to the importance of specificity in any discussion of ‘transnational cinema’. It has proven easy to conflate the terms ‘international’, ‘global’, ‘transregional’ and ‘transnational’, while rejecting ‘national’ cinema as somehow no longer relevant. In addition, writers all too often do not indicate whether their use of ‘transnational’ refers to viewing practices, financing strategies, themes, modes of narration, influences or critical approaches, among other factors. I will give one final example from a Mexican context to demonstrate how breaking down the term can help in film analysis. Y tu mamá también is made by a predominantly Mexican cast and crew for the domestic and foreign markets and was mostly funded by private Mexican production companies. However, it was taken up by US and international distribution company 20th Century Fox, and thus entered global distribution and exhibition networks. It has transnational filmic influences ranging from Jean-Luc Godard to US teen sex comedies and the road movie, but subverts the generic conventions of the latter two in order to comment on aspects specific to Mexican culture. By utilising the categories in this way we do not have to decide whether it is a national or transnational film as it is both in industrial and textual terms. We can thus rescue the concept of ‘transnational cinema’ if we break it down into specific categories and apply them carefully in any analysis of film cultures.