

## **Still thinking it over: The history of cinema, global industries, and local film cultures, as viewed from Spain**

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NECSUS 10 (2), Autumn 2021: 27–31

URL: <https://necsus-ejms.org/still-thinking-it-over-the-history-of-cinema-global-industries-and-local-film-cultures-as-viewed-from-spain/>

Following the invitation from NECSUS for its tenth anniversary issue, now seems the right time to look back at the ever-growing field of film studies and take the risk of putting forward a personal appraisal. But before considering the broader implications of my research career, I wish to acknowledge that neither my professional experiences nor my current and past reflections on film history would have been the same had I not had the luck to meet and learn from two outstanding scholars and exceptional human beings — Pierre Sorlin and Alberto Elena, who have inspired me and given me support at crucial moments in my career. In different ways and within different contexts, their efforts to establish a comparative, transnational approach in the cultural history of cinema cements some of the ideas contained in this reflection. Obviously, any shortcomings are my own.

As a film historian who has spent the most part of her professional life working on a rather peripheral European national cinema, I still believe that all that has been written on the thorny question of the intersections between the national and the international (and, or, the transnational) has a lot to teach us, not only as a fruitful approach to a more complete vision of our cultural past but also as a way of providing a repertory of ideas and new questions with which we may approach the future. Having something nuanced to say about the complex functioning of international cultural interchanges might be especially relevant now that momentous changes are happening in the global audiovisual industry. Postcolonial studies and the work on the cinemas of smaller nations, to mention only two significant and diverse examples, are

offering powerful guides on this issue.[1] However, film historians have also provided well-founded analyses that invite us to reconsider the way in which we envisage this whole matter. Following that thread, is it possible to imagine a future for media studies where the heavy weight of the past can be put to some kind of use? I strongly believe so, and, in the following lines I shall try to explain in what ways the study of history can still help us confront the future with a beneficial set of questions.

The development of history and theory of cinema has shown that practically every element of the complex ensemble of cinema has been and will continue to be subject to constant transactions between the national and the transnational. This affects actors and actresses (above or below the threshold of the stardom system), professionals of all trades (directors, directors of photography, screenwriters, artistic directors, etc), producers with different levels of power in the film industry, and also stories, genres, formats, styles, models, and even concrete frames. Moreover, this picture, which is already difficult enough to position in the historical narrative, has been complicated by the tricky question of reception. Audiences, institutions (critics, festivals, and private and public organisations and institutions), and, in short, every aspect that makes up 'film culture' has always been a battleground between the national (and/or local) and the global.

In an effort to summarise this puzzling picture and its effects on specific films, one could say that an audience can certainly be partially defined by the 'national' or 'local' (having an unsystematic but rather stable propensity over time to contemplate their own culture/identity on screen, which is characterised more by its intensity than by its coherence). Likewise, the creative act of making a film can emerge from a negotiation with the culture that nurtures it (genres, settings, stories, actors, etc). On the other hand, everything that has to do with 'commerce'[2] has no essential commitment to the national, although it might, in an instrumental way, play with its institutions (see, for example, the campaigns launched to demand protection laws against the invasion of foreign cultures) or promote the invention of powerful fragments of a national epic which prove particularly popular.

The 'film d'auteur' of the second half of the 1970s, or *art cinema*, with its intrinsic dependence on a transnational public willingness to enthusiastically support innovative and culturally committed works represents, from this point of view, a suggestive case study. As the film industry was gradually and inexorably losing its traditional source of income (ticket sales), it was forced

to diversify its products strategically to reach specific and fragmented audiences. Given this delicate restructuring, the idea of commercially using the artistic-cultural prestige that had been acquired by cinema since the second half of the 1940s is very understandable. Even more so if one takes into account the fact that, on passing the half-century mark, cinema could count, for the first time in its history, on a generation of moviegoers who, being passionate connoisseurs of classic cinema, had completed their education and forged their tastes with the cinema of modernity.

It was at that moment, just when New Hollywood[3] was about to supplant the French New Wave in the hearts of moviegoers (almost) all over the world, that the Spanish auteur film entered, along with the second wave of New German Cinema to occupy a part of the same space,[4] adopting, to a large extent, formulas and styles that were close to what was being proposed at the international level. It was a conception of cinema that had assimilated what it had learned from the New Wave and, more generally, from modernity, and had redirected it towards renewed, less fragmented, narrative schemes. With innovative themes, characters, and approaches, a refreshing use of music (pop music, in some cases) and/or of unusual visual solutions, this renovated 'new cinema' proved capable of attracting an enthusiastic audience of young moviegoers to theaters. Supported by the globalised network of film promotion institutions (festivals and specialised magazines) and being solidly established both in Europe and in the US, it finally established a model of 'Euro-American cinema'[5] that is worth revisiting.

In the Spanish case, the *art cinema* formula basically applies not only to films which were acclaimed on the international scene – *Cría cuervos* (*Raise Ravens*), for instance, directed by Carlos Saura in 1975, the year of Francisco Franco's death – but also to a few that had spectacular box office success in the domestic market but never achieved the same recognition in the global context (such as José Luis Borau's *Furtivos* [*Poachers*] released in the same year). And this is where the issue that has been raised in this essay comes full circle. Clearly, it is impossible to analyse and understand such culturally elaborate works as *Raise Ravens* and *Poachers* outside their specific national coordinates (whether in regards to Spanish traditions, or to the historical contingency posed by the exit from the dictatorship). However, as I argue here, it is equally essential to apply a pluri-national, synchronic, and comparative view. When addressed from the 'commerce of auteurism' viewpoint, it is easy to see how much this cinema owed to transnational models, and how close

Spanish society and culture were, and had been even during Francoism, to a large cluster of countries that enjoyed different political circumstances.

After all, what is particularly fascinating about film history, which stands at the core of its specificity, is its capacity to act as ‘the eye of the *Novecento*’[6]: a set of experiences, works, and testimonies that reveal with outstanding accuracy the imaginative world of the societies of the last century. What, then, can a proposed re-reading of the Spanish *art cinema* of the 1970s teach us? That art or *auteur* cinema should not be read only as the romantic product of a director’s creative personality, and/or as the result of his attitude towards his cultural (and/or political) whereabouts. In order to understand a scenario of changing identities and inevitable crossbreeding, as was the case of Spain’s transition to democracy, it is necessary to qualify a reading based on the political sphere (in which we can include the national dimension) by admitting the contradictory forces that run through it, such as the global trends of production models. At the opposite extreme of the industry vs art spectrum which cinema and audiovisual media span through, a similar objection could be raised in relation to what can be considered really American in 21st century Hollywood products. Or, getting even closer to our present and future, we may want to re-think what part of the Netflix formula, and its effort to target specific audiences, fits into a national framework. It is not only a matter of acknowledging glocalisation, but of questioning the very notion of center/periphery, and/or of its dominant formats and models.

To sum up: it is my firm belief that a sharper view of what happened in the past provides us with effective tools to view the present from a distance, and to recognise and analyse what we are witnessing at this very moment. If we want the small and large discoveries from the history of cinema to help us understand what lies ahead, our mission must be to continually enrich the study of the past, broaden its scope, and renew our questions, to understand not so much the roots of the present, but its inevitable complexity. There is still work to be done and if it is true that, as some historians jokingly affirm, the future of cinema is its past, the task might be more useful than some would think.

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## Notes

- [1] The theoretical framework embracing the essays collected in *Postcolonial Cinema Studies*, edited by Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller (Routledge, 2011), on the one hand, and in *The Cinema of Small Nations*, edited by Mette Hjort and Duncan Petrie (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), on the other, project the specificity of their cases towards a general re-assessment of the centre-periphery perspective.
- [2] Understood here in the sense used in Timothy Corrigan, 'The Commerce of Auteurism: A Voice without Authority', *New German Critique*, vol 49, 1990: 43-57.
- [3] We follow here the description given by Kristin Thompson, 1999.
- [4] Noted in Betz 2009, p. 29.
- [5] Lev 1993.
- [6] As described by Francesco Casetti in his powerful synthesis of the relationship between cinema and the 20th century in *Eye of the Century. Film, Experience, Modernity* (2008), originally titled *L'occhio del Novecento: cinema, esperienza, modernità* (Bompiani, 2005).