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Global Interchange: The Same, but Different

Rod Stoneman

International Relations: The Imposition from Elsewhere

Reflecting on international film and media training in the current epoch, we inevitably navigate within the framework imposed by a global monoculture. Even the terms and categories of this discussion—“film” and “media,” “training” and “education”—carry complex distinctions and connections that are ultimately caught up in the multiform contention of power relations between different parts of the world. Over the last ten years, I have been involved in several small-scale initiatives bringing new filmmakers from the south together for short series of workshops to develop and strengthen their projects. Inevitably they begin by negotiating existent structures and dominant ideas of film production both within their cultures and outside of them. Both filmmakers and their eventual audiences are unavoidably influenced by the modes of representation that are part of a cultural industry that has spread across the world but was manufactured elsewhere. Part of the process of training is to define and strengthen the direct speech of indigenous voices in film and other media that may take or leave elements of an imposed monoculture.

Many of the prevailing cultural modes that envelop and penetrate indigenous cultures encounter degrees of resistance, and there are significant counter-flows against the centripetal movement that carries dominant models toward prevalence. Digital means facilitate mash-ups that challenge the one-way flow of television and cinema; hip-hop and laptop music mixing create new versions of combined music. Graffiti changes the visual fabric of the city and offers a sub-environment with stencils, tags, and pieces that move around the edge of our everyday vision in cities. The subculture of street graffiti and tags may have emanated from subways in New York¹ to skateboard arenas in Los Angeles in the 1970s but they now reach vehicles and walls in the whole world's urban spaces, a route for artisanal and libertarian access to the public domain.²

There are also sets of economic and technological factors that have changed the cultural environment decisively over the last decades and continue to affect it. The political economy sets some of the parameters, while global connections enable finance and labor to flow in new patterns that maximize capital accumulation. The reciprocal interaction of economic factors with technological developments also supports the centralized dissemination of the audiovisual. But as the conflict over copyright and downloading indicates, counterculture can realize strong and effective action to deflect commercial control. Shops and stalls selling pirated videos in Amman or Hanoi or Caracas also seek to insinuate the indigenous among the most recent outputs of Los Angeles studios; much Bollywood distribution works in this way and Nollywood is entirely sold by DVD networks.

The reductive and negative misperceptions of southern cultures established in previous centuries during a colonial era are still layered into modern ideologies in the reproduction of Otherness.³ Edward Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Colonialism*⁴ offered a critique of historical impositions in the 1980s and explored the interrelationship between both cultural and material exploitation. The post-colonial politique has had some significant impact though this has largely been confined to the academic domain: to courses, conferences, and publications that open up these issues. However, many of the ideological assumptions and global imbalances that were analyzed and exposed in Said's critical account are still widespread in forms of popular culture that reproduce the hegemony of the north as the place to be, the way to look, and the lifestyle to aspire to. The epoch of colonialism has been brought to an end, but the representational and power relations are still operative in the contemporary recycling of the orientalist clichés, albeit in less overt ways.

News reporting and factual genres representing the global south often take the form of superficial and inaccurate parachute journalism. Michael Grade, when he was chief executive of Channel 4, launched *South*, a magazine program made by filmmakers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America and quipped that "most British television research into the third world takes place in Terminal 3 of Heathrow airport."⁵ In the last 20 years, the declining budgets available to newspapers and television stations has led to a reduction in the number of foreign correspondents with the beginnings of local knowledge that any western news organization can afford to keep in the field. However, there is a new and positive version of direct speech from the south—material shot and uploaded to YouTube by nonprofessionals reporting human rights abuses and often challenging aspects of northern news reporting. Direct speech was a central concept to many areas of commissioning and programming in the early period of Channel 4's existence; in the department I worked in this was evident in *People to People*, a community access strand, and *Cinema of Three Continents* and *South* for the third world. At least there is reduced mediation of the images when uploaded material is selected and verified for broadcast.⁶

The very high degree of selectivity in factual representations can take fact toward what we normally understand as fiction. It is not that the depictions are untrue in any simple way, but that they are such a chosen, partial medley that

they may frequently be contested as misrepresentation, a drastically incomplete or biased picture from start to finish. The sense that reported “facts” are one-sided or deficient often arises if we are involved in the issue depicted and have a sense of its complexity. It is then that the truncated and misshapen version offered by the professional media comes into starker focus. We somehow comfort ourselves with the disingenuous assumption that when we ingest television news bulletins we are watching summary updates on local and world events in order to be better informed. However it is often true that they function as pleasurable distractions, a succession of out of focus fragments that float past without offering us the analysis or background that could provide a deeper framework for understanding.

Even the formal arrangements of news formats impose specific understandings of the world: binary thinking and structures of repetition, narratives used to interpret complex situations in countries distant from the transmission centers. The sets, the presenters behind their uncluttered desks, reading autocues over emphasizing arbitrary syllables to inject meaning into a bland *text* that they have not written and have no relationship with. Studio newsreaders frame short sequences mediated by reporters striding toward the camera, explaining the world, the imprimatur of reality visually present over their shoulder.

It is significant that non-western news sources replicate existent formats exactly; Al Jazeera, Al Arabyia and teleSUR are carbon copies of western news designs. But within these formats there are important nuances of perspective and perception, the underlying viewpoint is often significantly different and this can provide a commutation test. Newspaper, television, and online practices



Figure 3.1 *Cross Cultural Television*, Hank Bull and Antoni Muntadas/Western Front Video Production, 1987.

appear to work within the established genre of factual reporting, retaining the status of balanced and truthful coverage bolstered by both sourced and anonymous quotations. Although the format is ubiquitous, it is regularly misused. To take an example from Latin America, there are many consistent stories about Hugo Chávez that look like traditional journalistic reports, but are disingenuous and dissembling as they are clearly an ensemble of meanings intentionally put together to create an overall sense that Chávez is authoritarian and ridiculous and the attempted social revolution in Venezuela a failure.⁷ The black propaganda has already been effective in creating a loose penumbra of negative connotations around Chávez and his politics. The repeated application of such pejorative reporting has led most people, even those on the liberal left, to assume that Chávez is some combination of clown and dictator and that any supposed attempt at social change in Venezuela over the last ten years has been a complete disappointment.

The flows of media are accessed by broad and unstable categories: documentary and fiction, magazine programme and chat show, advertisement and reality television. Fiction features and television drama formats mostly emanate from the bottom left hand corner of the United States. They constitute a dominant mode of representation that continues to pervade our screens. As Robert Olson noted in *Hollywood Planet*, we live in a world where the global audience is 100 times more likely to view a Hollywood product than a film from elsewhere—Africa, Asia, Latin America, even English speaking Europe, Canada, or Australia.⁸ The 2005 UNESCO “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions” reaffirmed the role of free-flowing cultural exchange in the full realization of human rights, fundamental freedoms, and sustainable development.⁹ But many western spectators cannot even guess what films from distant or foreign places could look like because they have not encountered them.

Images are taken and then reimported to the locals by a dominant cinema that even their national television seeks to imitate. Telenovellas, popular Latin American soap operas, generally dramatize the loves and losses of the white, wealthy elite; illicit romances and dangerous liaisons are played out in marble villas or in the backs of sports cars. And the indigenous Indian woman who sits glued to the screen every night enjoying her favorite drama watches herself being acted out of history.

The possibilities of intelligence and curiosity that should arise from our encounter with an unfamiliar place or culture on another part of the planet are diminished and dislocated; these settings are absorbed by narratives that contain them as potential tourism within images that can be adequately controlled and sold.

An omnivorous global phenomenon like *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, 2009) centers on a two-and-a-half hour feature watched (in 2D or 3D versions) in a short period of time by a high proportion of the world’s population.¹⁰ At a superficial level, there are aspects to the text that catch the eye as progressive, but as Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, beneath the would-be liberal implications on the surface of *Avatar* lies the reactionary myth that it is (still) only the benevolent whites that can save the natives.¹¹

Another redemptive narrative that expresses the underlying compassion and munificence of the West is *Born into Brothels* (dir. Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, 2004). This Oscar-winning documentary describes a workshop using photography to help the children of sex workers in Calcutta. The children's parents are shown as incapable and the American photographer and filmmaker is constructed as the children's only hope, their agency for redemption, as she is the only caring person able to offer the children an opportunity to escape from their oppressive environment and the chance to find fulfillment elsewhere. But again *Born into Brothels* raises questions about the provenance and determinations of the images and sounds we have been listening to. A partial story told by whom? For whom?

I was present at the Havana film festival in 1985 for the premiere of *Missing* (dir. Costa Gavras, USA, 1982). On that occasion the Cubans greatly appreciated that the stars of the movie, Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek, had broken the American embargo on the island and come to Cuba to be present at the screening. But, in the bar afterwards, I heard the quiet mutterings of reasonable reproach: "It took the murder of the one American boy in the football stadium to get a movie made about the coup in Chile." There is an exchange in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1975 fiction film *The Passenger* when the journalist, played by Jack Nicholson, proposes an interview with an African tribesman who says "Mr. Locke there are perfectly satisfactory answers to all your questions, but I don't think you understand how little you can learn from them. Your questions are much more revealing about yourself than my answers will be about me."¹² Without dismissing or diminishing progressive films made by the northern filmmakers, the imperative at this point in time surely should be to develop and circulate direct speech from the south. What is needed are new voices that will offer, in addition to new narratives and perspectives, different modes of thought.

The Role of Workshops: Capacity Creation

Training collaborations between the north and south contribute to building the capacity for new formations of indigenous filmmaking from those cultures that have been made peripheral. At their best, short-term workshop interventions are small-scale openings for the exchange of ideas and expertise. These interventions are often based on the model of the short peripatetic project-focused workshops developed in 1988 by European Audiovisual Entrepreneurs (EAVE) and funded by the EU MEDIA initiative. Combining experienced practitioners from the north and south with participating filmmakers from the region, they function as the temporary space for interchanges as compared with the more fixed transmissions of such permanent structures as state run film schools. Various involvements in workshop series in the Maghreb, Vietnam, West Africa, and the Middle East over the last ten years have been revelatory and formative for me.¹³

Joining the team at the end of the first year of *Med Film Development* in Marrakech in December 2006, I became involved in pedagogically shaping a further two years of that EU funded project. Working closely with Dora

Bouchoucha and Lina Chaabane of Sud Ecrature on a francophone script development workshop founded in 1997 and based in Tunis, it was immediately clear to me that their approach was informed by their work in an independent production company, Nomadis Images, making fiction films such as *Satin Rouge* (*Red Satin*; dir. Raja Amari, Tunisia, 2002) and *Les Secrets / Anonymes* (*Buried Secrets*; dir. Raja Amari, Tunisia, 2009) and documentaries like *It Was Better Tomorrow* (dir. Hinde Boujemaa, Tunisia, 2012). We went on to organize *Beyond Borders*, a MEDIA-funded workshop held in Djerba in July 2010 and this collaboration has continued with *Med Film Factory* based in the Royal Film Commission in Amman, Jordan which began in 2011 and runs for three years.¹⁴ The starting point for offering experience and expertise from the West is a commitment to indigenous forms, which leads to approaches to training that are based on experiment and choice. What is sought is the encouragement of diversity rather than the western industrial model of replication and mimesis in formulaic filmmaking.

The holistic approach we adopted ensures that the creative and financial elements are seen as integrally related. European training, in the 1980s and 1990s, had begun to adopt a “businesslike” approach; fuelled by a desire for film to be understood as an industry with serious economic potential, the model privileged entrepreneurial producers and underplayed creative dimensions. We developed workshop series that were addressed to writers, producers, and directors, but in a way that ensured that the delineation of interlocking functions were thought through in the process. In one Marrakech session, a counterintuitive role-reversal exercise involved the project producers outlining the narrative and creative elements and the directors talking through the financial plan.¹⁵

Working through the parameters of proposed projects over a one-year period is a productive starting point for understanding international interchange—the reflexivity and pluralism of critical practice offers an implicit challenge to dominant models and carries ideas through to new forms of fabrication. The expositions from the south relativize an insular and self-perpetuating image system from the north; such discourses may begin as productions of individual self-expression by the filmmaker and can go on to realize a broader social effect as they spread through their audiences.

Clearly, the terms of academic activity and judgment deployed in global exchanges are not neutral or objective, but specific and determined. Without conscious or conspiratorial intent they can reinforce the channels of one-way transmission and influence and efface the way in which Otherness is manufactured, experienced, and understood in the world. Anglophone conceptions of knowledge and methods of teaching are institutionally widespread. The tunnel vision of the western academy often replicates structures of knowledge that transmit discourse and power from the north to the south of the world. It is often preferable, in relation to many systems of education based on western models, to break with the mode of secondary education and its process of memorized regurgitation, learning by rote, and individual assessment for exams. Instead, one can explore the reconstitution of the experience of primary education with its focus on play, curiosity and exploration, and group work.

It is in the small print of our transactions and tools of understanding that we find the traces of Eurocentric ideological process: although the 1973 Gall-Peters projection challenged previous two-dimensional maps of the world, the Mercator projection that inflates the sizes of regions according to their distance from the equator is still the most commonly used.¹⁶

The history of the development of color film was dominated by the need to reproduce Caucasian skin tones. Indeed, the color of Technicolor was specifically chemically balanced with this in mind, a process always understood as natural and neutral. Representing the company, Natalie Kalmus addressed Hollywood technicians about "Colour Consciousness": "An enhanced realism enables us to portray life and nature as it really is."¹⁷ Godard famously refused to use Kodak film during a 1971 assignment in Mozambique on the grounds that it was "inherently racist." Hegemony is present even in the telephone number system—the US code is 00 1.

Short-term works based on practice-based collaborations can transform conceptual relations between places and people into reciprocal activity; minor alteration and thoroughgoing change are both possible by bringing ideology into visibility, relativizing and undermining those pervasive but imperceptible forms of influence.

The three personal examples below are used to illustrate aspects of the global dynamic between cultures. They emanate from an earlier period when I was working for British television to support the production and transmission of films from the south, part of a policy to increase the volume and presence of direct speech from Africa, Asia, and Latin America on Channel 4 by screening a wider range of cinema. This was developed and carried out within the Independent Film and Video department, led by Alan Fountain and with Caroline Spry.¹⁸ They illustrate the provenance of my understandings and raise issues about the dynamics involved in the construction and circulation of films from all parts of the world. They also underline the necessity of supporting the development of a continuous capacity for direct production in the south and, in my mind, carrying that production to wide reception in the north. I have found them useful in opening up debates about training processes.

1) Space and perspective in images of war: The Wild Field

In 1991, I went to Hanoi several times to view and select feature films as part of the programming of a season called *Vietnam Cinema*. Some of the films dealt with the war, but most of them were concerned with other aspects of experience and were part of our attempt to bring a wider range of world cinema to British television screens. The eight-week season was scheduled for transmission when, at the last minute, Liz Forgan (the head of Factual Programmes) explained that it would have to be cancelled and delayed. The logic was explained in a fierce exchange of memos: the first Gulf war had just begun and she felt it was inappropriate for the channel to be showing films that "depict American soldiers being killed when real American soldiers are dying in the desert." I tried to explain that



Figure 3.2 *The Wild Field.*

the indigenous Vietnamese films were broadly humanist and even antiwar in approach and that they could not be described as simply “anti-American.” This was to no avail—it was a “judgement of taste”; the season had to be delayed until the war was over.

So many films have been produced *about* Vietnam while the nuances and complexities of its own culture and cinema remain hidden; our visual memory is already saturated with images of this country, but only seen through western viewfinders. We recognize the familiar sight of the boy on the back of an ox rising out of the rice paddy field from some of the 600 cinema and television films that Hollywood has produced over the years. When we think of the Vietnam War, it is the American movie genre that looms into view; even the label is different, for the Vietnamese call it the “American War” (to distinguish it from the “French War” and the “Japanese War”). Indigenous films from Vietnam are invisible and unavailable. With the exception of *The Green Berets* (dir. John Wayne and Ray Kellogg, USA, 1968)—the only American film made while the war was being fought and with the motive of overtly supporting government policy—the many well-intentioned, “liberal” movies like *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979) or *Platoon* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 1986) act out moral dilemmas, issues, and conflicts that seem distant and irrelevant when viewed from a non-American perspective. Inevitably, it is films like these that provide the terms and assumptions with which western audiences understand that particular war as well as more current conflicts.

The perspective is physically and dramatically reversed in *The Wild Field* (dir. Hong Sen, Vietnam, 1979), one of the Vietnamese films we screened in the Channel 4 season, for in this film the attacking swoops of helicopter gunships are viewed from the ground. The young couple and their small baby boy live on a platform and hut suspended on bamboo poles above the flood plain of the Mekong Delta, which are adjusted seasonally according to the water level. There is a sequence where they have to dive beneath the surface to hide from predatory American helicopters (they breathe underwater through hollow reeds and hide their baby underwater in the bubble of an air-filled plastic bag). This is in stark contrast to our experience of the aggressive exhilaration of a formation of choppers, accompanied by Wagner, swooping on a Vietnamese village from a height in *Apocalypse Now*.

The questions asked by *Loin du Vietnam* (*Far From Vietnam*; dir. Jean-Luc Godard, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda, 1967), which was made in France at the height of the war, are still valid for wars in the Middle East: "It is there, all around us, within us. It begins when we start to understand the Vietnamese are fighting for us and to measure our debt to them... Faced with this challenge, our choice in rich societies is simple: we must either implement the physical destruction of all that resists us, a task which risks going beyond our means of destruction, or we must undertake a total transformation in ourselves."

This is not just a question of historical representation, for these examples from films from and about Vietnam that I saw decades ago still seem pertinent when viewing contemporary cinema: the thrills of contemporary films like *Blackhawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, 2001) take the viewer to a vicarious version of an adrenalin-soaked soldierly exhilaration in killing. This fiction film brings to mind the disturbing *Collateral Murder* video released by Wikileaks where, on July 12, 2007, a dozen civilians, mostly journalists working for Reuters, and two children were shot from the air by Apache helicopters circling a Baghdad suburb (the voices comment: "Nice"... "Good shooting!" "Thank you"). It is as if the adults and children ("Well it's their fault for bringing their kids into a battle") are figments in a video game, bits of other human beings' bodies blown away as if they were stray pixels.¹⁹ There is a safe psychological and spatial distance that makes violence easier—a military technician in Nebraska becomes a video game player guiding a drone attack in Afghanistan.²⁰

Theory: Critical Context

A range of new training practices have been developed in different contexts permitting the framework of critical ideas and theory to play a role in opening a longer-term dialogue around the choices that new generations of filmmakers can make. There is a horizontal articulation between their approaches and a vertical channel extending to the work of previous generations.

The tool box of theory is part of the constructive process of critical reflection, developing forms of viewing and production where detachment allows ideas to

be brought to bear on practical skills. The significance of viewing a wide range of films and developing agile reflexive thought and detailed readings of how meaning is made are crucial in the training and support of new generations of independent filmmakers. The curiosity and experimentation that are encouraged in critical practitioners make their approach distinctive and support the making of films with something to say. This is distinct from and opposed to the fixity and replication of “correct” professional craft training predicated on mimesis—the perpetuation of established methods.

The vocabulary of “theory” draws on ideas and reflections, including those that have emerged from the diverse instances of creative thinking by filmmakers in the past such as Sergei Eisenstein, Maya Deren, Robert Bresson, and Andrei Tarkovsky. Their writings exemplify the brave aspiration to develop their own configurations of sound and image and to think them through as alternatives to the dominant mode of production. As a student in the 1970s and 1980s, I encountered some fruitful examples of filmmaking practice working through theory: Malcolm LeGrice, Noël Burch, Peter Wollen, and Laura Mulvey in England; Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Marie Straub/Danièle Huillet, Guy Debord, Dušan Makavejev, and Alexander Kluge on the continent.

A pluralist approach to politicized aesthetics should start with the productive interdependence between at least three distinct levels of engagement, each with different audiences: filmmaking oriented toward agit prop, propaganda, and the theoretical/experimental. Agit prop is immediate and addresses urgent and local issues; propaganda works with longer-term subject matter; and, at its most productive, theory and experimentation with radical form can open and shape new forms and spaces for other areas of practice. There is no reason preemptively to confine this third area of political filmmaking to small audiences.²¹ Possibilities for reception for indigenous production in the south are also affected by the political economy of the funding and distribution context.²²

Many southern filmmakers start with a conception of being an auteur who stands against the division of labor encountered in industrial production structures.²³ Directors are generally also the writers of their features (and in many cases they are producers as well). This may offer occasional opportunities to destabilize and challenge the simple and divisive boundaries of both artisanal and industrial approaches. The side effects of the auteurial aspiration became clear at the FESPACO Newsreel workshops held at the Imagine Film School, set up in February 2003 by leading West African director Gaston Kaboré. This small independent school is exemplary—an individual initiative to provide a space for flexible, targeted training that is much more adaptable than that provided by large-scale unwieldy state institutions. FESPACO, the Pan-African film festival, is held in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso every two years. In 2009, 2011, and 2013 we ran workshops for students, enabling them creatively to shape pieces within a preformed magazine format. In the first year, the newsreel configuration proved difficult for some students because they were worried that it would truncate their artistic choices—for them the priority was to write and realize short fiction films. The concept of the audience is relevant to resolving these contradictions and, as

Orson Welles once suggested in an apocryphal remark, “The lack of limitations is the enemy of art.”

Entering the established structures of television and cinema in order to change and undermine repetitious industrial formats and to introduce glimpses of progressive agendas within these frameworks is, in the longer term, imperative. Films found in festivals, at art houses, and on DVDs offer a challenge to dominant genres, but, to be effective, effort is needed to use such possibilities to reach beyond their initially limited audiences. Audience expectations for action narrative can confine the personal filmmaking that emanates from developing countries to festivals and export unless strategies of presentation and marketing are developed to counter this.

2) *Textures of tenderness: Zan Boko*

Supporting the conditions for direct speech and dissemination on Channel 4, I became aware of the subtle understandings available through different forms of film. Having purchased Gaston Kaboré’s *Wend Kuuni* (Burkina Faso, 1982) for screening in “Africa on Africa”—a season on Channel 4 in the summer of 1984²⁴—I arranged support for a new feature with this filmmaker with a pre-purchase, a more helpful form of coproduction that provides some finance up-front.

The feature film *Zan Boko* (Burkina Faso, 1988) emerged from this. And in this film there is a moment when two women sit outside their huts in a village



Figure 3.3 *Zan Boko*.

to talk. One woman has a baby and she hands the baby to an elder daughter to look after as they chat: “How’s the baby?” “How are things going with your husband?” As they talk there is a lilting sound, for each of them makes a gentle background hum under the other’s words; when one is talking, the other is going “mmmm...aahh.” Each of their voices hums under the other’s speech, and we sense the exquisite granularity of a culture, a moment of recognition—but also of dissimilarity.

What the two women are doing is perfectly recognizable in many cultures. It is an intimate instance of the everyday tenderness that flows between people. Everywhere around the world, women friends have intimate conversations with each other about how their lives and homes are going, how their babies are doing and how their domestic spheres connect. Whether it is in Caracas or Manhattan, Rome or Hong Kong, forms of those exchanges and conversations continue. But the actual texture of the exchange in Moré in the village of Tensobentenga in the countryside outside Ouagadougou is completely specific and different, so there is a double movement of something that can be recognized in other cultures but is also, clearly, a different form and version of it. Actually it is a very calm, gentle, and affectionate interchange, one that is probably more difficult to achieve in busy New York or Paris or any other speedy metropolis. Buried in a feature film narrative the double movement of both strangeness and recognition is exemplary as it relativizes and questions our habitual practices as one of its significant effects. It clearly prompts questioning and curiosity in different places in our lives.

Practice: Inside the Sign

Practice-based training involves working on and thinking about the multiple initial steps necessary to develop actual films; intervening with specific projects, it sets in motion the dynamic between both the scripts and their financial plans. In my experience this process is enhanced when it is possible to shoot and edit a short section from the planned films in a practical workshop context, as this invariably proves to be a productive exercise.²⁵ Whether this process confirms the strategy and aesthetic or provokes thought about modification, it is always a focused one aimed at strengthening a given project through the concrete shaping of its material. The fabrication of a potential sequence, the making of its meanings, initiates a constructive reflection on it and a dialogue between filmmakers and others. Working with the plasticity of sound and picture is a starting point for understanding the way any film will function in relation to the wider context of its reception.

Getting close to the mechanisms and textures of meaning making reveals the choices that constitute cultural specificity. Cultural difference underpins this process and the tutors on the Med Film Development and Med Film Factory workshops in the Maghreb and Middle East were a careful combination of practitioners from the region and from Europe. Creative work within the area of signification can generate new and explicit forms of knowledge, moving viewers and makers from consumption to analysis. However, some elements of the artistic

process will always remain somewhat opaque and impermeable, emanating from other creative sources in the psyche. Ingmar Bergman once talked of pulling “the brightly coloured thread sticking out of the dark sack of the unconscious. If I begin to wind up this thread, and do it carefully, a complete film will emerge.”²⁶ In Marrakech, Hager Karray, a Lacanian psychoanalyst from Tunis, had detailed and productive sessions with writers and directors asking them to examine where the characters that they were forming in their scripts had “come from.”

A holistic approach to training and project development endeavors to relate the financial parameters of production to the creative ones, and vice versa. There is always an integrated movement forward and back between creative and financial factors in filmmaking and a clear sense of the ways they have operated, all of which can be captured with different film production case histories. The time span involved in bring the filmmakers’ projects to the three project workshops held during a 12-month period is significant; across a year these workshops are separated by long periods between the sessions when scripts can be redrafted and budgets rethought. Directors can begin to define and orchestrate all the formal parameters of film form. In this connection, authors as different as Noël Burch and Bruce Block are helpful, for they have written useful formalist analyses that can be deployed for the telling of different stories, in different ways, from different perspectives. The orchestration of the visual parameters of a film (space, line, shape, tone, color, movement, rhythm), outlined in Block’s *The Visual Story*, is, for example, a stimulating agenda for directors at an early stage of planning the look of their projects. While directing their attention to schematic visual planning, it does not impose style or format—in fact although they were spelled out at the University of Southern California, Block’s parameters can be traced to early Soviet formalism.²⁷

Countering dominant modes of production involves thoughtful work with forms of sound in combination with image, a reflection on and provisional renegotiation of normative configurations of signifying materials. At the Royal Film Commission in Amman, Larry Sider (2011) and Gary Sanctuary (2012) worked with filmmakers and editors to examine the choices involved in sound design. Calling attention to the “materiality” of film is an activity that refers to the process of filmmaking and to the physicality of its signifiers, while also inviting consideration of the economic context of a given film. Manipulating the calibrations of meaning making in new work, in combination with watching and studying films—observing the codes by which meaning is made—creates deeper and longer-term understandings than is possible with traditional interpretive explanation. The established academic discipline of Film Studies offers discussion of finished texts in terms of detached interpretations that bear little or no relation to the process of production. Through the conjunction and adjustment of diverse signifying materials choice, purpose, and process come into focus. This praxis can be redeployed by new filmmakers from the south of the world to challenge the image systems in the north that permeate their culture. These filmmakers are caught within a complex and reciprocal dynamic between the world and its image in our most visually mediated societies. The symbolic order connects with a social order and these constantly reinforce and renew one another in what is a

pervasive image system that crosses the globe. And that system reiterates authorized narratives that disclose events deceptively.

Movement between training that integrates making new films with the necessity of analyzing and explaining existent media is a continuing dynamic. Both inform each other and bring the detail of a signifying process into conscious focus. “*Ostranenie*,” “making strange,” or “defamiliarization” was a term invented by Viktor Shklovsky in the moment of Russian Formalism, as a means to “distinguish poetic from practical language on the basis of the former’s perceptibility.”²⁸ The sequences from *The Wild Field*, *Zan Boko* and *Tinpis Run* (dir. Pengau Nengo, Papua New Guinea, 1991) are mentioned in this essay as examples of the process and highlight the form and conditions of filmmaking in different cultures.

Examining specific differences between versions of a sequence in a comparative analysis leads to an understanding of the deployment of particular cinematic codes in a given historical context, to insight into the politics of representation. This, in turn, sheds light on the responsibilities attached to different forms of signifying practice. The reflexivity of the text points toward choice and a manipulation of image and sound, to the selectivity that delivers and confirms our understandings.

In film practice, the material methods of constructing a sequence may be made evident or may be displaced and disguised. Western film is characterized by an approach to form that masks its own contrivance. The sound and image relation, whether in a news bulletin, feature film, or short advertisement, works to conceal the practices of coding that are constitutive of it. Social engagement makes demands on the imagination rather than encouraging the replication of dominant forms that disguise their fabrication. Some forms of filmmaking from the south challenge the versions of dominant forms that efface their own operation. There are recent and specific examples of such countering that throw the signifier into focus. Relevant here, historically, are films that we supported with coproduction funds at Channel 4, films like Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki* (*The Journey of the Hyena*, Senegal, 1973) and *Hyènes* (*Hyenas*, Senegal, 1992). And more recent examples include *Tropical Malady* by Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand, 2004), or Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Bamako* (Mali, 2006), and Merzak Allouache’s *Normal!* (Algeria, 2011), all of which point to renewals of the non-realist project of radical form. The manufacture of these new models of image and sound conjunction brings to the center of attention decisions about form and the way in which form calibrates and positions meanings. Implications for power relations embedded in the process of spectatorship are present at every stage, for as Jean-Luc Godard suggested, “these are the forms that tell us finally what is the bottom of things.”²⁹

Of course the polysemy or ambiguity in an “open text” has implications for its potential audience, and for the specific conditions of reception. Differences between filmmakers and cinemas within the variegated cultures of Africa, Asia, and Latin America are clear—but there is still a binary opposition to western forms. A moment of dynamic expansion is present precisely at the point when the possibilities of change at the end of postmodernism lead to a renewed version of politicized modernism. This refoundation can be sketched: it would

involve reflexive forms of investigation and would be transmitted through new electronic technologies, developing a dynamic beyond the historical moment of Third Cinema and the reflexive process of Modernism in the West. A dialogue leading to a dialectical synthesis, and to an interdependence working between oppositional filmmakers in different parts of the world, refuses a return to old versions of imitation, which were responses to an uninformed appropriation of the cultures of others; the imported socialist realism of some newly independent African states in one direction or Pablo Picasso's requisition of African masks for *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. Ruysschaert Version) in another.

3) Trans cultural passage: *Tinpis Run*

Carrying through the coproduction of films for a strand like Cinema of Three Continents at Channel 4 was a first direct encounter with a range of filmmakers from the south for me. It brought questions of sequence construction and understanding images from other cultures into the foreground as occasionally local specificity stands in the way of transcultural understanding.

I went to Paris to see the rough cut of *Tinpis Run* by Pengau Nengo, the first indigenous feature film to be made in Papua New Guinea in 1991. Viewing a rough cut, no matter how informal, introduces a delicate dynamic into the editing process; I would try to bring a constructive and supportive approach to this most subtle interaction—and in all cases, whether the filmmakers were Papuans or French or Americans, whoever, I would always be trying to feed responses into an understanding of how the film was going to work, acting as a premonition of



Figure 3.4 *Tinpis Run*.

the audience, without playing the Hollywood producer, wearing jackboots and demanding that “the opening must be re-cut or the ending changed.”

I have a memory of viewing a sequence in the rough cut of *Tinpis Run* where there seemed to be a dispute between two men who were arguing outside their houses in a village and then they were scrapping and fighting and then arguing again—it was a confusing mess. I had to say, “I have completely lost the plot here, I can’t see what’s happening.” And the filmmakers explained, “Well the first argument takes place in his village, and then they go to the other guy’s village and that’s where they have the fight.” And I said, “Well how would I know that? They don’t travel and it just looks like they remain in the same village!” But they patiently insisted: “Well of course anyone can see they are two different villages because the huts in the first village, which is near the sea, are all two-feet off the ground on breeze blocks, and the huts in the other village, which is up in the mountains, are sitting on the ground.” And I said, “Well, thank you for pointing this out to me, but, frankly, that detail is not going to be visible to a Western audience and we need this film to work for British television.” However, I hoped I also suggested that this could be dealt with without introducing something completely extraneous into the flow of their filmmaking, just for us. They said they would think about it and they came back with a neat solution: they just added shots of the two guys in a pickup truck going from the first village by the coast into the hills to the other village! They knew that it wouldn’t damage the rhythm of the film, or harm the language of the film for their own audience while mere foreigners, who are not used to noticing or understanding the implication of the huts on stilts, could also understand the sequential movement of the narrative better.

A similar issue arose in a more pressurized context with the North American financing of an Irish film, when Miramax, as the co-financiers, looked at a fine cut of the Irish film *Last of the High Kings* (dir. David Keating, Ireland, 1996). There is a sequence where the eldest son and his brothers secretly spike the punch offered up by their mother at a political gathering at their home. As they determine to get everyone drunk at a post election party they pour miscellaneous drink into a bucket to make some highly alcoholic mix, gleefully picking up a bottle and yelling “Poteen—let’s use that.” Ferdia MacAnna’s script was exact—*poitín/poteen* is a specifically and highly alcoholic beverage (60–95 percent proof) illegally brewed from potatoes in Ireland. Miramax was concerned that the meaning of this scene would be lost as “poteen” would be an opaque term to most American cinema goers. An eventual compromise involved retaining the scripted and culturally authentic “poteen” while adding the extraneous exclamations “moonshine, hooch,” dubbed onto to the soundtrack in postproduction.

Connection: The Exchange of a Process of Change

Inevitably, seeing the world from different places leads to different working approaches to all the dimensions of filmmaking, in terms of political perspective and cultural form, as well as to different attitudes toward the use of technology in a production process. The context that is brought to shooting sequences during the

directors' workshop in the Med Film Factory workshops in Amman de-emphasizes the dependence on elaborate equipment encouraged in western production culture. For example during a discussion held at the School of Sound in London in 2011, Gaston Kaboré surprised the audience by talking of the simplicity of means in his approach to using sound and making film. For him, complex digital hard- and software is not the centre of the creative process, which must be based on authenticity and integrity.³⁰ There are also significant differences in the sense of whom one is making a film for, the emphasis in Kaboré's case being on the film's role and place in his own culture at a particular historical moment.³¹

The differences between polished student work from well-equipped high-tech vocational schools in London or Berlin or New York that provide professional training and the output of peripatetic workshops in Tunis or Ouagadougou or Hanoi can be considerable. The impact of glossy new student films from prominent national film schools in the West generally involves the kind of ego confidence that is necessary for a young person to push into highly competitive, prestigious, and lucrative industrial careers. But, occasionally one can be forgiven for feeling that the meretricious surface and specious content raises the question "Why bother to make this film at all?" Like much of the output of the culture industry itself, many of the films are precisely *about nothing*. The environment in which they are produced encourages such film-school films to manifest a severe disconnect from any aesthetic-cultural or political-social frame of reference.

Many western film schools set student exercises that consist of producing bogus advertisements, of taking a product in order to rehearse the production of a replica of a commercial for it. The permeation of commodities, it seems, has extended outwards from the over 3,000 advertising images that it is estimated we see every day.³² The majority of terrestrial and satellite television channels are interspersed with advertisements, as is a large part of the audio and visual landscape (radio, the internet, billboards, newspapers, and magazines). The interruptions in question are part of the rhythm of our existence; they are the very sinew of our culture, and a kind of interference that is so much part of the surrounding visual signal that it is difficult to notice it, let alone criticize it. The spaces of higher educational initiatives provide opportunities to assess the impact and implications of consumer culture in late capitalism. If young filmmakers are exposed to some form of critique they will at least possess the critical perspective needed to understand the significance of the flow of commercialized images they are asked to produce, if and when various economic imperatives drive them into work in advertising.

The political economy of the media encourages this—we live in a culture of distraction where short-term, superficial narratives are at the center of media attention while determinant forces in the political economy are seen as insufficiently interesting or attractive to enter the frame of our viewing. We are experiencing an historical moment where, in the judgment of the mainstream media, the considerable scale of the ecological and economic crises does not seem to bring the underlying basis of the social formation into question. There appears to be little appetite to reconsider the overall system and the possibility of retracting

from an economy of perpetual growth. In fact, rather than “wasting a crisis,” financial forces continue to press forward against a weakened state sector and, having eviscerated public service television, propose new incursions into the public domain in order to create new mechanisms for making profit in health and education.

It is also true that new filmmakers from the south (who have generally been through a longer and slower process leading to an apprenticeship in filmmaking) are often looking to replicate models from the institutionalized modes of representation, which are, of course, equated with commercial success. But although the filmmakers’ aspirations are inevitably influenced by visual hierarchies built elsewhere, the latter are necessarily approached from a different cultural context. As a result of the often contradictory provenance of these filmmakers’ work, the films end up having a different potential and often lead to useful workshop debates with a group of peers, with input being further provided by practitioners from the region and elsewhere.

Is it far-fetched to imagine that new varieties of images and sounds might be transposed to other forms and processes? Is there a connection between this kind of transposition and the ways of questioning and working that have been evoked here in connection with various peripatetic workshops? And is the change implied in contemporary versions of art and politics a significant factor? Med Film Development and Med Film Factory workshops have taken place in the Maghreb and Middle East alongside the recent political mobilizations of the Arab Spring. Many of the participants’ projects explore the human dimension of politics and the drama of historical change in a time of turbulence.³³

“Occupy,” and “Indignado” movements represent different versions of a concrete claim to the commons and have precipitated a resurgence of interest in understanding social participation in political terms. Movements in different parts of the world are exploring radical shapes for participatory democracy in order to find forms to effect change. The “Plea for Products of High Necessity” issued by nine intellectuals from Guadeloupe inspired a resolute reaffirmation of the utopian; it reasserts the need for that which gives meaning to our lives: the poetic, the imaginative, and the reflective and insists on the aspiration to self-fulfillment nourished by music, sports, dancing, reading, philosophy, spirituality, and love.³⁴

There is always a difficulty of moving from description and analysis of existent societies to claims about what *might be*, yet new social formations do depend on inventive explorations of the route and the means toward envisaged futures. If the future of film training is to avoid the danger of becoming an appropriated and emptied concept, we have to refind the concrete moments of radical history that can be carried to the future. But, as industrialized culture and its perpetuation through marketing is countered through new progressive praxis, this may also create a starting point for the creation of a more reciprocal and sustainable community in all parts and places; a polyphonic many-sided dialogue begins with an approach to training that engages with the fiercely inequitable divide between north and south.

Notes

1. Mervyn Kurlansky and Jon Naar, text by Norman Mailer, *Watching My Name Go By* (London: Mathews Miller Dunbar, 1974).
2. Julian Stallabrass, *Gargantua* (London: Verso, 1996), 141.
3. Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Other* (London: Verso, 2008).
4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); *Culture and Colonialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).
5. *South* was launched at the Venezuelan Embassy on September 19, 1991; Terminal 3 facilitated all intercontinental flights at that time.
6. Companies like Storyful work to verify and validate material for networks of broadcasters, “discovering the most relevant content from the social web, filtering actionable news from the noise,” <http://storyful.com/> (accessed December 17, 2012).
7. Peter Sherwell, “President Hugo Chavez’s Revolution in Venezuela Limits Singing in Shower,” *The Sunday Telegraph*, November 29, 2009; Rod Stoneman, “The Ever Bizarre Rules of British Journalism,” <http://www.irishleftreview.org/2010/01/12/everbizarre-rules-british-journalism/> (accessed January 8, 2013).
8. Scott Robert Olson, *Hollywood Planet, Global Media and the Competitive Advantage of Narrative Transparency* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999), 30.
9. UNESCO, “Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions,” http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (accessed September 9, 2012).
10. It was released during Xmas 2009 and quickly achieved the largest box office gross in history: \$2,782,275,172; <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avatar.htm> (accessed December 19, 2012).
11. Slavoj Žižek, “Return of the Natives,” *New Statesman*, March 4, 2010, <http://www.newstatesman.com/film/2010/03/avatar-reality-love-couple-sex> (accessed June 29, 2012). The accounts of Palestinians projecting the film on the walls of houses in Gaza suggest that the superficially radical layer of the narrative can be read in an emancipatory way.
12. Significantly this film was cowritten with Mark Peploe and Peter Wollen. The latter played a key role in introducing politicized structural theory to film studies in the Anglophone world.
13. The Hanoi Academy of Theatre and Cinema, Vietnam 2005; a script workshop at Imagine, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso 2005; Med Film Development, Marrakech, Morocco 2006–2008; FESPACO newsreel workshops Ouagadougou 2009, 2011, and 2013; Beyond Borders, Djerba, Tunisia 2010; Med Film Factory, Amman, Jordan 2011–2013.
14. <http://www.medfilmfactory.com/about.php> (accessed December 27, 2012).
15. Devised by visiting tutor David Keating.
16. <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gall-peters.jpg> and <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mercator-projection.jpg>
17. Brian Winston, *Technologies of Seeing* (London: BFI, 1996), 43.
18. The Department’s work is described in detail in Rod Stoneman, “Sins of Commission,” *Screen* 33, no. 2 (1992); republished in *Rogue Reels, Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945–90*, ed. Margaret Dickinson (London: BFI, 1999).
19. <http://www.collateralmurder.com/> (accessed July 8, 2012).
20. The experiences enacted in the action narratives of so many war films serve to confirm the predisposition to obedience to authority figures indicated by Stanley Milgram’s well-known 1961 experiments at Yale.

21. It is clear from my experience at Channel 4 that, carefully positioned and presented, there are significant audiences for “difficult” work; these practical experiences are discussed in detail in “Sins of Commission.”
22. Rod Stoneman, “African Cinema: Addressee Unknown,” *Vertigo* Summer/Autumn (1993); republished as “South/South Axis: For a Cinema Built By, With and For Africans,” in *African Experiences of Cinema*, ed. Imruh Bakari and Mbye Cham (London: BFI, 1996).
23. Rod Stoneman, “Under the Shadow of Hollywood: the Industrial Versus the Artisanal,” *The Irish Review* 24 (1999); republished in *Kinema* 13 (2000).
24. The season was transmitted from 25 June–23 July 1984.
25. My remarks refer to experiences in the context of the Moonstone workshop, held annually in Renvyle, Connemara, Ireland 1999–2003; FESPACO newsreel workshops at Imagine, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso 2009 and 2011; Med Film Factory in Amman, Jordan 2012.
26. Quoted by Lee R. Bobker, *Elements of Film* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1969), 157.
27. Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973) and Bruce Block, *The Visual Story* (Oxford: Focal Press, 2008).
28. Lawrence Crawford, “Viktor Shklovskij: Différance in Defamiliarization,” *Comparative Literature* 36 (1984).
29. “Que ce sont les formes qui nous disent finalement ce qu’il y a au fond des choses,” *Histoire(s) du Cinema* 3a, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Switzerland, 1988–1998).
30. Described in detail in “Isn’t It Strange that ‘World’ means Everything outside the West?” an interview with Rod Stoneman in *De-Westernising Film Studies*, ed. Will Higbee and Saer Maty Ba (London: Routledge, 2012).
31. The frame around the work to develop production capacity in film is the simple disparity: Average GNI per capita per annum in Burkina Faso \$550 (life expectancy at birth 55 years) and USA \$47,340 (life expectancy at birth 78 years). Figures 2007–2011 from <http://econ.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/0,,menuPK:476823~pagePK:64165236~piPK:64165141~theSitePK:469372,00.html> (accessed June 3, 2012).
32. Price Waterhouse Coopers, *Global Entertainment and Media Outlook: 2006–2010* (New York: PWC, 2006).
33. Jean-Pierre Filiu, *The Arab Revolution* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011).
34. Ernest Breleur et al., “Plea for Products of High Necessity,” originally published in *Le Monde*, February 16, 2009; available from *l’Humanité in English*, <http://www.humaniteinenglish.com/spip.php?article1163> (accessed December 18, 2012).