

Realist Cinema as World Cinema

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The globalising impetus

- Literature was the artistic field where the globalising impetus, contained in the term 'world cinema', first made an appearance, with the concept of *Weltliteratur*, or 'world literature', by Goethe, who developed a method of looking at 'alien' literatures by comparison and contrast with those of the West (Dennison and Lim 2006: 2).
- From this derives a tradition in comparative literary studies, drawing on the opposition between the West and its others, which has spread through all other arts and continues to thrive almost unchanged up to this day.
- Thus world literature and arts tend to be lumped together and to be defined by what they are not, that is, by the rules pertaining to the Western canon.



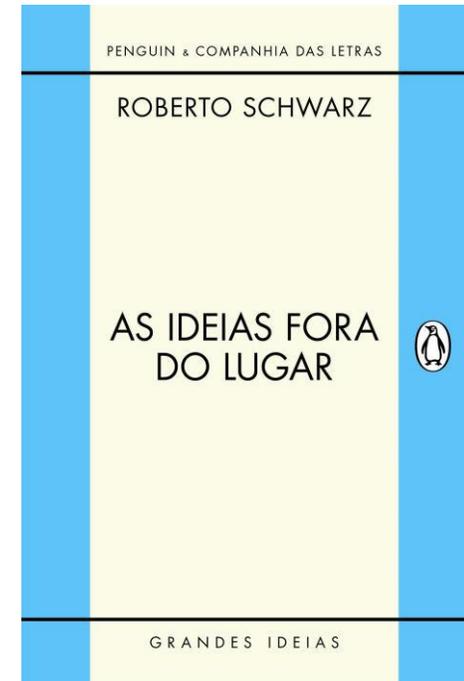
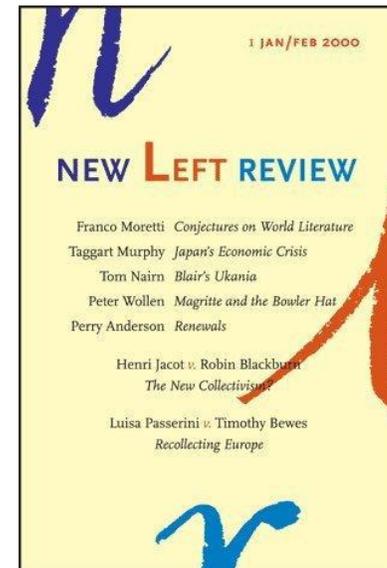
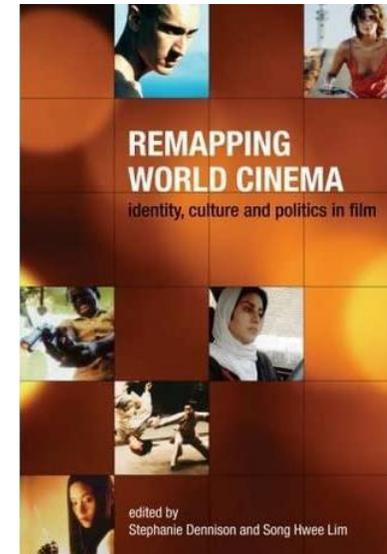
World Cinema and the binary division

- World Cinema is usually defined as 'the non-Hollywood cinema'.
- This binary division unwittingly sanctions the American way of looking at the world, according to which Hollywood is the centre and all other cinemas are the periphery (even though the world continues to be round).
- This convention, particularly cultivated in the Anglophone countries, has been widely adopted by critics and historians as a way of organising and structuring film history and geography.



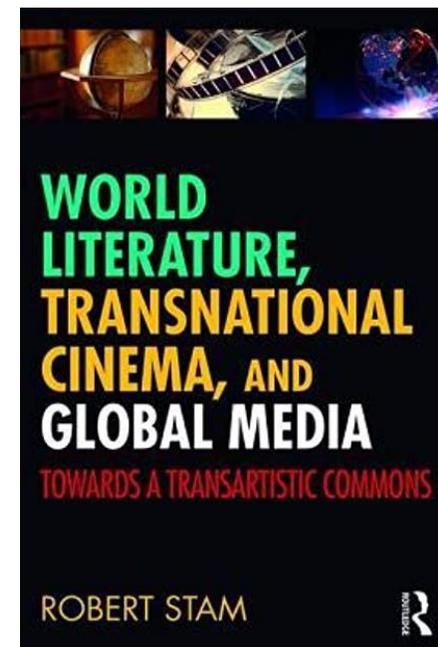
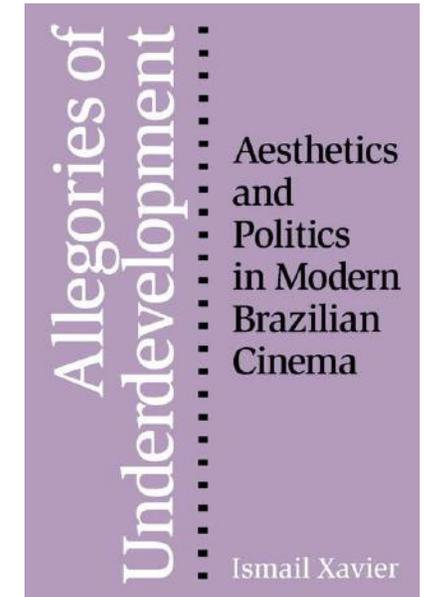
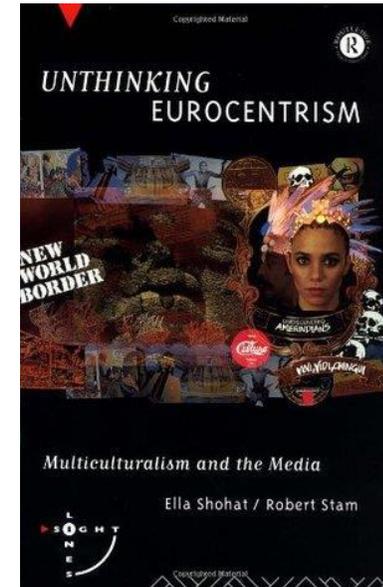
The Atlas and the third element

- Dudley Andrew's 'An Atlas of World Cinema' aims to relativise Hollywood's importance as a mainstream cinema and to show how peaks of production, popularity and artistic input are attained in different times and places across the globe.
- It derives from Franco Moretti's polemical essay 'Conjectures on World Literature', published in the first issue of the re-launched *New Left Review* in the year 2000.
- Moretti applies to World Literature the dialectics between centre and periphery imported from political economy, with particular emphasis on the 'foreign debt', a term coined by Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz to signify the large use made by colonised countries of models provided by the colonisers, especially France and Britain.
- Moretti introduces a third element, the 'local narrative voice'.
- Andrew shifts the emphasis from Hollywood to 'the regional interaction that is particularly visible when storytelling traditions are in focus'.



Against the binary system

- Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994), dismiss as unnecessary and ultimately wrong the world division between 'us' and the 'other', 'centre and periphery', 'the West and the Rest'.
- They champion a 'polycentric multiculturalism' that decentres 'the discussion by calling attention to other traditions, other cinemas and other audio-visual forms' (7).
- Examples: the pioneering character of the Brazilian modernist movement of the 1920s; Ismail Xavier's 'allegories of underdevelopment'.
- Stam's *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media* (2019) calls for a 'transartistic commons' that would put on an equal footing, and allow for exchanges across, not only all cinemas, but also all the arts in the world.



The polycentric approach to World Cinema

- I have developed a democratic and inclusive approach, which defines world cinema positively, that is, as a polycentric phenomenon with peaks of creation in different places and periods.
- These ‘creative peaks’ are tributary to Andrew’s ‘atlas of world cinema’, which proposes the organisation of film history through ‘waves, which roll through adjacent cultures’. Andrew cites as an example the French New Wave, which ‘buoyed French film in 1959 and rolled around the world, affecting in different ways and under dissimilar circumstances the cinema lives of Britain, Japan, Cuba, Brazil, Argentina, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and later Taiwan’.
- Waves have peaks in different places and times. As regards the French New Wave, for example, one could see a previous crest of a wave a little earlier in the mid-1950s with the films focusing on the so-called Sun Tribe, or *taiyozoku*, in Japan, which had a decisive influence on Truffaut.
- One could also look at the New German Cinema of the 1960s and 1970s in relation to how it re-elaborated elements of the Brazilian Cinema Novo, which had started a few years earlier.
- Thinking cinema according to its creative peaks allows us to blur all orders of hierarchy and primacy.

CHAPTER TWO

Towards a positive definition of world cinema

Lúcia Nagib

Over the past decade or so film theory has been subjected to a recycling process, often indicated in book titles by words such as ‘rethinking’, ‘unthinking’, ‘reinventing’ or ‘reconstructing’ (see, for example, Shohat & Stam 1994, Bordwell & Carroll 1996, Gledhill & Williams 2000 and Guneratne & Dissanayake 2003). There is a perceived exhaustion of traditional theoretical assessment of cinema, which some authors, such as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (1996), ascribe to petrified models based on psychoanalysis and cultural studies. As a contribution to the debate, I would like to suggest that the exhaustion may well reside above all in the object that has inspired such models, that is to say Hollywood cinema. One way of reflecting on this exhaustion is to elaborate on how Hollywood relates to ‘world cinema’, an increasingly popular term highlighting the global aspect of film production. Indeed, as communication nets spread and cinema transcends national and continental borders, world cinema issues proliferate in bibliographic output and academic syllabuses, where they articulate with a wider perception of culture in the postcolonial era.

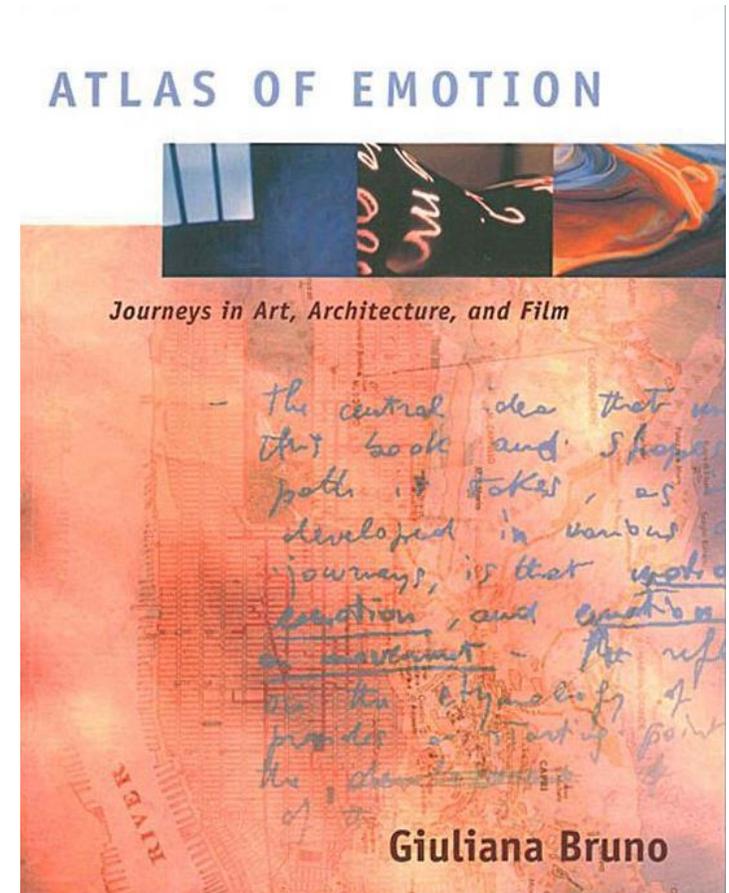
However common it has become, the term ‘world cinema’ still lacks a proper, positive definition. Despite its all-encompassing, democratic vocation, it is not usually employed to mean cinema worldwide. On the contrary, the usual way of defining it is restrictive and negative, as ‘the non-Hollywood cinema’. Needless to say, negation here translates a positive intention to turn difference from the dominant model into a virtue to be rescued from an unequal competition. However, it unwittingly sanctions the American way of looking at the world, according to which Hollywood is the centre and all other cinemas are the periphery.

Such a binary division of the world, a convention particularly cultivated in the Anglophone countries, has been widely adopted by critics and historians as a way of organising and structuring film history and geography. An example is *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (2000). This pioneer attempt to look at world cinema as an independent theoretical subject does not include American cinema, to which a separate volume of the Oxford University Press series is devoted, likewise called *American Cinema and Hollywood: Critical Approaches*. The procedure is justified by Hill with the argument that ‘since the end of World War I, the US film industry has been the dominant cinema in the world and this has also meant that it has enjoyed a pre-eminent position within film studies’ (2000: xiv).

Indisputable though it may sound, the argument contains a few questionable generalisations. It does not specify, for example, whether ‘dominant cinema’ refers to box-office revenues or number of viewers. It also fails to spell out the exact time and place of this dominance. To counter it, one could point out the fact that in the late 1930s

'Creative Peaks' and the world 'atlas'

- In Giuliana Bruno's *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (2004) the atlas metaphor enables an interdisciplinary exploration of art history, architecture, fashion and film, by means of the figures of motion and emotion.
- Anna Tsing and collaborators on the 'Feral Atlas' <https://feralAtlas.supdigital.org/> : the 'feral atlas' is made of 'patches', which replace the idea of enclosed territories with cascading chains of effects.



Chris Jordan's film *Albatross*, in *Feral Atlas*, documents albatross chicks dying as a result of being fed plastic by their parents on the Pacific island of Midway.



Realism and World Cinema

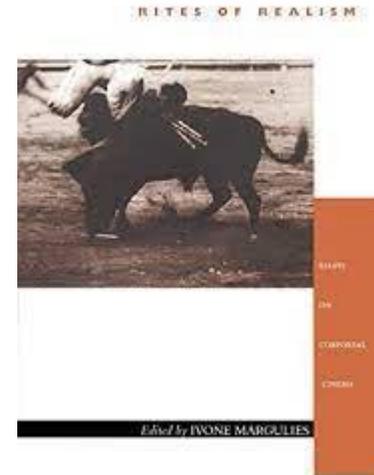
- Thomas Elsaesser (2009: 3): 'European art/auteur cinema (and by extension, world cinema) has always defined itself against Hollywood on the basis of its greater realism'.
- Hypothesis: world cinema started in Europe, with Italian neorealism in the 1940s, which, on the basis of a documentary approach to the real, offered fertile ground for the development of art and auteur cinema.
- The aesthetics and revelatory power of this foundational movement inspired a flurry of subsequent realist schools in the world, such as Indian independent cinema in the 1950s, Brazilian Cinema Novo in the 1960s, African post-independence cinemas in the 1970s, the New Iranian Cinema in the 1980s, Danish Dogme 95 in the 1990s and many other new waves and new cinemas, remaining influential up to today.

Bazinian realism

- Neorealism was also the touchstone of André Bazin's concept of cinematic realism.
- Bazin was the first to locate realism *at the point of production*, by extolling, in neorealism, the regular use of real locations, non-professional actors (as well as actors stripped of their acting personas) and the combination of long takes and long shots that preserve the space-time integrity of the profilmic event.
- Nagib 2011; 2020: an ethics of the real has bound world films together across history and geography at cinema's most creative peaks.
- I locate cinematic realism in the way films are made, rather than on their modes of reception and spectatorship.
- In so doing, I hope to demonstrate that realism is timeless and capable of producing a world of interconnected cinemas.

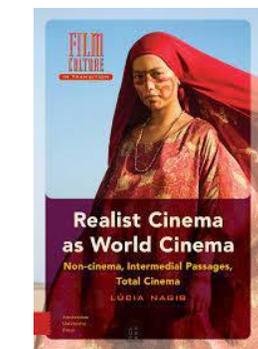
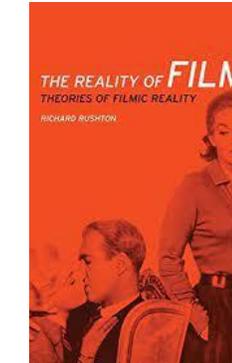
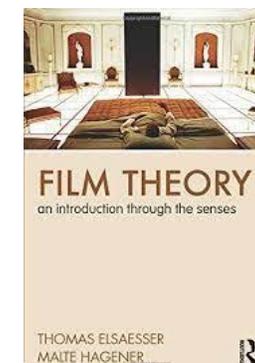
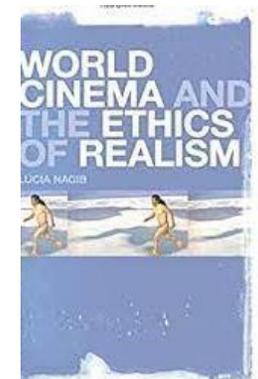
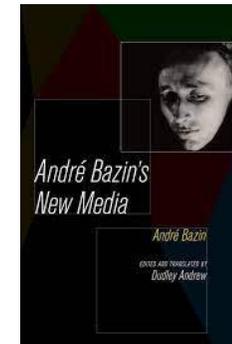
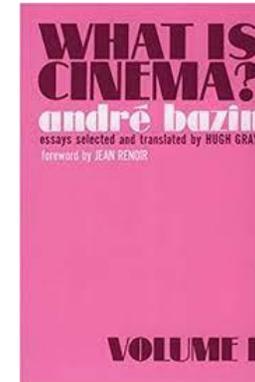
The Realist Turn

- The term 'realism' was banned from the progressive agenda between the 1960s and 80s as 'politically retrograde' and 'naïve' (Gunning 2011: 119).
- Ivone Margulies collection *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema* (2003) included Bazin's 'Death Every Afternoon', a key piece on the singularity of the recorded event. Margulies focuses on 'performative' realism, i.e., the enactment or re-enactment of the profilmic event in the phenomenological world that she went on to crystallise in the idea of the embodied self in *In Person: Reenactment in Postwar and Contemporary Cinema* (2019).



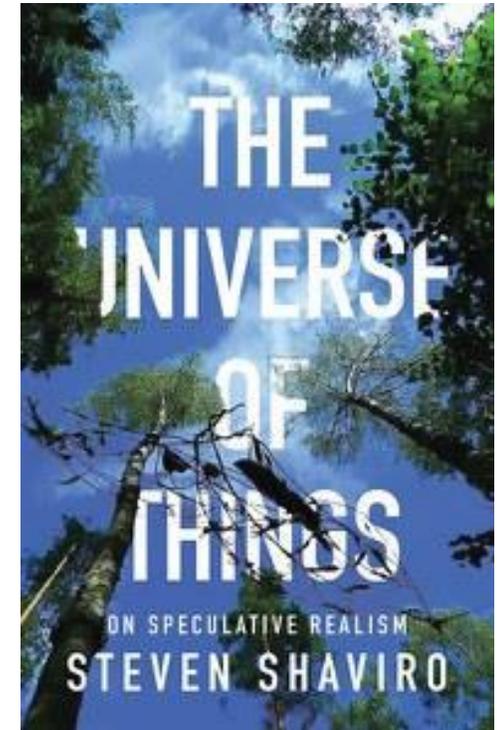
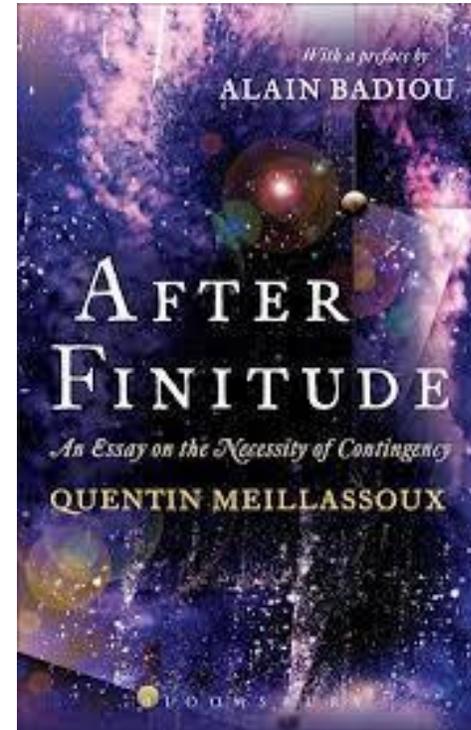
The Bazinian Revival and the Ontological Turn

- Dudley Andrew (2010) *What Cinema Is!, Bazin's Quest and its Charge*, in response to Bazin's structuring interrogation *What Is Cinema?* (1967-2005)
- Dudley Andrew and Hervé Jourbert-Laurencin (eds.) (2011), *Opening Bazin: Postwar Film Theory & its Afterlife*
- Dudley Andrew (ed.) (2014), *André Bazin's New Media*
- Joubert-Laurencin (ed.) (2015), *André Bazin, Écrits complets I & II*.
- Lúcia Nagib & Cecília Mello (eds.) (2009), *Realism and the Audiovisual Media*.
- Lúcia Nagib (2011), *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*.
- Lúcia Nagib (2020), *Realist Cinema as World Cinema*.
- Thomas Elsaesser & Malte Haneger (2010), *Film Theory: an introduction through the senses*.
- Richard Rushton (2011), *The Reality of Film: Theories of Filmic Reality*.
- Tiago de Luca (2014) *Realism of the Senses in World Cinema: The Experience of Physical Reality*.



The Speculative Turn

- The 2000s saw the development of ‘speculative realism’, ‘speculative materialism’, ‘object-oriented philosophy’ and ‘object-oriented ontology’ (OOO), which has shifted the focus onto things regardless of their correlation with human thought.
- Promoters include from Quentin Meillassoux to popular scientist Timothy Morton.
- Other adpts: Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, Slavoj Žižek, Alberto Toscano, François Laruelle, Steven Shaviro.
- Speculative realism’s non-anthropocentric and environmentally-minded stance resonates with Bazin’s own ontology of the photographic image and his privileging of the objective over the subjective world.



Recurrent tropes: the runner on foot.

The French nouvelle vague's foundational film, *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, François Truffaut, 1959)



Recurrent tropes: the runner on foot.

Brazil's Cinema Novo milestone *Black God, White Devil* (*Deus e o diabo na terra do sol*, Glauber Rocha, 1964)



Recurrent tropes: the runner on foot.

The landmark in sub-Saharan filmmaking, *Yaaba* (Idrissa Ouédraogo, 1989), from Burkina Faso.



Recurrent tropes: the runner on foot.

The first Inuit feature film ever made, *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner* (Zacharias Kunuk, 2001).



Conversing across national borders

- Stemming from entirely disparate historical moments, cultures and locations, these films arrive at a surprisingly similar presentational solution for key moments in the plot, namely, the protagonists' protracted act of running on foot.
- Performed in reality, in vast wintry landscapes, burning deserts or Arctic sea ice, these races impose their own narrative, one which relates to the characters' recognising, experiencing, demarcating and taking possession of a territory, and, in so doing, defining a people and its culture.
- All these films had as sine-qua-non condition to be shot on real locations, which are presented to the spectator as a signifier of cultural resistance and national or regional identity.

Realism as mode of production

- the physical engagement on the part of crew and cast with the profilmic event;
- the near identity between the cast and their roles;
- real location shooting;
- the audiovisual medium's inherent indexical property.
- In films resulting from this mode of production, the illusionistic fictional thread (if it exists) interweaves with documentary footage and/or approach, as well as with crew and cast's direct interference with the historical world, aimed at producing, as well as reproducing, social and historical reality.

The trope of the bicycle introduced by the foundational neorealist film *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio de Sica, 1948)



The film offers the realist counterpart of Hollywood's dream factory, as represented by the billboard of Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946) which Antonio Ricci, the poor cyclist, is in charge of putting up.



The bicycle trope and the child: the same private father-son drama, entirely drawn from De Sica's film, characterises a landmark of the 1980s New Iranian Cinema, *The Cyclist* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1987).



The bicycle trope in *Beijing Bicycle* (Wang Xiaoshuai, 2001), a notable representative of the Chinese 6th generation of independent filmmakers.





Wajda, directed in 2012 by Haifaa al-Mansour, Saudi Arabia's first ever female film director.

Wajda craves for a bicycle, whose use by women is banned in the country, but with which she endeavours to outcompete her male counterparts.

