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Transnational Turn in Film Studies

Contemporary researchers emphasize the widespread use of “transnational” in humanistic discourse; some even speak of the “transnational turn”, or a kind of theoretical reorientation in the debate on the nature of global links. In contrast to the paradigm shift, the turn, as understood by Doris Bachmann-Medick, involves recognizing methodological pluralism, going beyond the limits, while at the same time transforming the earlier concepts and accepting the contingency of knowledge, which means embracing the fact that there are many possible ways of looking at the same object¹.

On the other hand, Mette Hjort has noted a growing tendency for excessive and uncritical use of the concept of transnational “as a largely self-evident qualifier requiring only minimal conceptual clarification”². The idea of transnationalism plays an important role in the social sciences; I do not intend, however, to refer to sociological or economic theories, as in this area the idea of “transnational” functions primarily as a specific modification of the concept of globalization (as Steven Vertovec convincingly states in his book). I would rather focus on film studies that introduced such a category, namely Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu’s research of Chinese cinema and that of Andrew Higson in relation to British cinema³.

¹ Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns. New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, translate by Adam Blauhut, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter) (2016), p.11-12.

² Mette Hjort, „On the Plurality of Cinematic Transnationalism”, in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Nataša Ďurovičová and Kathleen Newman (London and New York: Routledge) (2010), p. 13.

³ Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu, „Historical Introduction. Chinese Cinemas (1896-1996) and Transnational Film Studies”, in: *Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender*, ed. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press) (1997), p. 1-31. Andrew Higson, „The limiting imagination of national cinema”, in: *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie (London and New York: Routledge) (2000), p. 57-68.

In the latter case, the aim was to undermine a dominant perspective in film studies and to understand the limitations of “tendency to focus only on those films that narrate the nation as just a finite, limited space, inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off to other identities besides national identities”⁴. Higson’s concept had two basic weaknesses: firstly, the author focused on the relationship between Hollywood and British cinema; secondly, the idea of transnational was considered primarily in terms of production, distribution, and reception, completely overlooking the existence of diasporic and postcolonial themes, which became important components of transnational turn.

Higson’s proposal was the starting point for Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, who in the introduction to the anthology titled *Transnational Cinema*, wrote that „a key to transnationalism is the recognition of the decline of national sovereignty as a regular force in global coexistence, (...) dissolution of any stable connection between a film’s place of production and/or setting and the nationality of its makers and performers”⁵. However, Ezra and Rowden went much further, and placed the concept of transnationalism in other contexts associated with migration and the functioning of the modern diasporas. At the same time, they understood why it was so important to take into account the relationship between global and local dimensions, and the postnational version of the imagined community, in which one’s identity is suspended between the different spaces.

The issues of migration and development of contemporary diasporas play a leading role in the so-called *accented cinema*. The notion, introduced by Hamid Naficy, refers to transnational films made by migrants or political refugees, who describe the experience of living in a host country, trying to cope with loss, a state of being torn apart, and being homesick. Naficy’s concept is by no means limited to a set of particular themes or the ethnic origin of filmmakers, but seeks a common denominator linking the various works in terms of style or narrative. It indicates the privileged function of landscapes, the importance of multilingualism in the dialogue, voice-over narration, and the use of road movie conventions⁶.

Diasporic films are most frequently made outside the mainstream cinema, as they are independent productions in which the artists put an emphasis on a personal aspect of the stories being told through the use of epistolary narration (which is common e.g. in the films by Atom Egoyan, Chantal Akerman, and Ann Hui). The main theme is usually the search for identity that transcends national and

⁴ Andrew Higson, p. 60.

⁵ Elizabeth Ezra, Terry Rowden, *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*, (New York: Routledge) (2006), p. 1.

⁶ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press) (2001), p. 24-26.

cultural boundaries, the construction of certain images of home, and showing the problematic nature of such representations in the context of nostalgia.

“Transnational cinema has the potential to both reveal the diasporic experience and challenge the privileged site of the national as the space in which cultural identity and imagined communities are formed”⁷. Diasporic cinema may be „defined as transnational in the sense that it brings into question how fixed ideas of a national film culture are constantly being transformed by the presence of protagonists (and indeed film-makers) who have a presence within the nation, even if they exist on its margins, but find their origins quite clearly beyond it”⁸.

We discover that the concept of a nation as a coherent entity gradually gives way to hybridity and transculturality, which seem to be the categories that best describe the essence of modern life, based on the free movement of people, goods and services, porosity of contemporary borders, and the interpenetration of cultural influences. Hybridity should not be understood as the abolition of contradictions, erasing of the differences or unification, because “it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or two scenes of the book, in a dialectical play of recognition”⁹.

Modern theorists highlight the link between the concept of hybridity and such related terms as *mestizaje* or *métissage*, because all of them reject the idea of a coherent and unified culture expressed by organicistic metaphors. A hybrid subject exists at the frontiers, meeting points, or at the crossroads of different cultures. Sometimes hybridization is associated with the process of borrowing and exchange, thanks to which it undermines the process of thinking in terms of simple binary oppositions.

The formation of a hybrid identity is a symptom of cultural transformation, the result of the instability of existing categories; however, it does not always involve the colonial experience. On the contrary, it is more often linked with different forms of movement and migration that help build transnational culture. In this way, it is possible to make a significant shift in emphasis from the study of the subjugated ones who lived in former colonies toward the analysis of diasporic communities operating in European countries. Thanks to this shift, one may also notice the links between discontinuity, rupture, and rootlessness that characterize contemporary immigrants, as well as see similar processes of deterritorialization and the expropriation of cultural heritage in postcolonial countries.

⁷ Will Higbee, Song Hwee Lim, „Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies”, *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2010), p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, s. 11.

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge) (1994), p. 162.

The latest research clearly shows that the concept of transnationality cannot merely concern the issues of co-production, global distribution, and reception; on the other hand, it should include political and social factors that enable a better understanding of contemporary cinema and the surrounding world. Perhaps that is why Will Higbee, when searching for a less ambiguous term, suggested the concept of transvergence to describe the diasporic and postcolonial cinema, in order to leave behind “potentially problematic contemporary notions of globalization”¹⁰. In his understanding, transvergence cinema is connected with instability, lack of continuity and consistency, and involves undermining of such dichotomies as home/exile, centre/periphery, self/other.

Another solution helping to overcome the problems resulting from the excessive use of the concept of transnationality may be the one offered by Wolfgang Welsch, who uses the concept of transculturality: an idea inspired by the writings of Fernando Ortiz. The Cuban anthropologist in his book on the cultivation of tobacco and sugar used the word “transculturality” to describe the processes occurring in the colonial countries, in an effort to explain the impact of migration on the formation of a culture¹¹. This concept allows one to go beyond the understanding of the national culture as a closed and separate entity, and uncover relationships between seemingly distant areas by revealing the benefits of the process in which many possible ways of life are merged together.

“It is, I think, the advantage of the transculturality concept over competing concepts that it explains uniformization and intermixing processes on one side and the emergence of new diversity on the other side at the same time and by means of the same formula”¹². Therefore, transculturality means life in suspension, moving on the margins, coming to terms with casualness and instability. „*Transness* describes a moment of in-betweenness, a liminal status that may represent a point in process of transformation from one category to another”¹³. The concept of transculturality is not based on binary oppositions, but consists in combining the elements and crossings: „transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation (...) It promotes not separation, but exchange and interaction”¹⁴.

¹⁰ Will Higbee, „Beyond the (Trans)national: Toward a Cinema of Transvergence in Postcolonial and Diasporic Francophone Cinema(s)”, *Studies in French Cinema* 7:2 (2007), p. 80.

¹¹ Wolfgang Welsch, „Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today”, in *Spaces of Cultures: City, Nation, World*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, (London: SAGE) (1999), pp. 194-213.

¹² Ibidem, p. 204.

¹³ Christopher Clark, „Transculturation, Transsexual, and Turkish Germany: Kutluğ Ataman’s *Lola und Bilidikid*”, *German Life and Letters* 59:4 (2006), p. 558.

¹⁴ Welsch, p. 205.

The prefix *trans-*, which is borrowed from Latin, indicates crossing the borders and going beyond; that is why the papers collected in this issue of our magazine suggest that a transnational approach involves accepting methodological pluralism and seeking the links between the phenomena that were previously regarded as separate. Adopting this perspective allows one to look at the seemingly distant concepts and to go beyond the national paradigm in reflection on media.

One should mention that although in the past Polish cinema was considered primarily in the national perspective, the last few years have brought the publication of several papers on its transnational character. This fact was emphasized by Ewa Mazierska and Michael Goddard, who claimed that it “has always been, in a sense, transnational, thanks to the strong presence of Polish directors on the international scene; [which unfortunately] is barely reflected in the studies of transnational or world cinema”¹⁵. This is, for example, the perspective taken by Sebastian Jagielski in his essay, in which he analyses the on-screen images of Elżbieta Czyżewska.

Most of the presented papers, however, concern world cinema, with a special emphasis on the relations between East and West: Jane Hanley analyses performances of Japanese actress Rinko Kikuchi in two transnational films: Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Babel* (2006) and Guillermo del Toro’s *Pacific Rim* (2013). The author’s principal aim is to characterize the changing images of Asian people in Hollywood cinema and the possibility of cross-cultural communication.

Lukasz Plesnar, when choosing two movies produced by Clint Eastwood in 2006 (*Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*), focuses on the question of stereotypical images of the Japanese in American films and stresses the attempts of going beyond such a simplified image. “[*Letters from Iwo Jima*] is the only American combat movie made from a Japanese point of view and the only one in which the author tries to understand and show respect to old Japanese customs and the contemporary contradiction of Japanese *ego*”. Kaja Łuczyńska, in turn, examines a shift in the image of race and ethnicity after 9/11, when focusing on screen images of South Asian in *New York* (2009, Kabir Khan), *My Name Is Khan* (2010, Karan Johar), and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012, Mira Nair).

Bartłomiej Nowak and Bilge Golge, respectively, offer interesting views of the relations between East and West. The former studies how contemporary film adaptations relate to literary texts, and how certain adaptations expand the boundaries of the original readership and audience by including new locations and contexts. Nowak stresses a hybrid dimension of some films based on Jane Austen’s books as they are transferred in the context of Indian culture, while Bilge Golge analyses representations of yoga practices in Western media.

¹⁵ Ewa Mazierska, Michael Goddard, *Introduction. Polish Cinema beyond Polish Borders*, in *Polish Cinema in a Transnational Context*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press) (2014), p. 9.

Aesthetics and film theory play an essential role in the texts presented in the final part of the magazine. Miłosz Stelmach starts from the theoretical findings of András Bálint Kovács, John Orr, and Rafał Syska, and characterizes the neomodern film as a transnational phenomenon. The paper by Bolesław Racięski offers a peculiar development of these proposals, showing how the creators of contemporary Mexican cinema use the minimalist approach to express ideas about the local social and cultural issues, whereby linking transnational narrative strategies of neomodern cinema with national history and mythology. In his analysis of *BabaKiueria*, Rafał Nahirny uses the postcolonial perspective to describe the process of taking control over their own image by the indigenous people of Australia.

Numerous authors study the phenomenon of transnational in the context of identity and include both aesthetic and political aspects. The researchers are convinced that it is necessary to go beyond a Eurocentric perspective and overcome the limitations stemming from the opposition between a national and transnational point of view. What is more, it is crucial to see the links between the local and the global aspects, and to embrace a transcultural exchange. Following the assumptions of Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, we should accept that „in the study of films, a critical transnationalism does not ghettoize transnational film-making in interstitial and marginal spaces, but rather interrogates how these film-making activities negotiate with the national on all levels: from cultural policy to financial sources, from the multiculturalism of difference to how it reconfigures a nation’s image of itself”¹⁶.

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¹⁶ Will Higbee, Song Hwee Lim, „Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies”, *Transnational Cinemas* 1:1 (2010), p. 18.

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