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Encounters across borders: Introduction

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At the 2006 Domitor conference, which was dedicated to ‘Early Cinema and the “National”’ (in scare-quotes), Tom Gunning gave the closing paper. He presented a critique of the focus on the national that the conference had chosen, declaring that he rather subscribed to the statement that early cinema was a global cinema and had, in a way, been international before it became national (Gunning 2008). His point, obviously, was not to claim that early cinema had managed in its first years to stay clear of nationalism. Quite on the contrary, as many contributions to the conference demonstrated, the ‘national’ had played a fairly significant role – not only because of the jingoism involved, for instance, in early war propaganda (Spanish-American War, Boer War), but also because it could function as a commodity and as spectacle. The global outreach of moving pictures was by no means a sign of an original ‘innocence’ of the new medium: ‘If cinema crossed borders easily in its first decades, it followed global pathways opened up by worldwide capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism’ (2008, 11).

Gunning’s critical remarks aimed first and foremost at addressing the limitations of a perspective that focused on the *category* of the national, as well as the consequences this might have for a field of research such as early cinema, which in many ways was confronted with the fact that the horizon of the nation was too narrow to understand the various facets of the new medium that one wished to study. In addition, the *concept* of the national itself had turned out to be problematic when looking at certain objects, such as travelogues filmed by, for instance, an Italian production company in the Netherlands and then distributed internationally, or so-called Westerns shot in the French Camargue. This is why Nanna Verhoeff suggested a distinction between the ‘national’, which refers to an origin, the ‘nationalist’, which refers to a sense of cultural belonging or ownership, and the ‘nationness’, which refers to generally recognised image of ‘nation’ (2006, 160). Here, it becomes apparent that the national can be used both as a *category of scale* for geopolitical territories and/or as a *concept* when referring to various layers of cultural identities. Depending on the research problem, the national may or may not be a suitable unit of scale or a relevant aspect of cultural identity; therefore, researchers should not take the national as the default unit for their investigations, nor even imply that national scale and national identity can be considered to be congruent.

How then should we address the various phenomena in early cinema that clearly go beyond the national? The most obvious solution would be to refer to them as ‘international’. Indeed, the second Domitor conference, held in Lausanne in 1992, was dedicated to the

‘internationality’ of early cinema. Its English title, ‘Images Across Borders’, explored the impact of international circulation on early films – not only on their formal characteristics and the representations they presented, but also on film stock, technology and technological know-how. Several contributions also dealt with international competition and attempts to protect national markets against foreign imports (Albera and Cosandey 1995).

Yet, not only in Cinema Studies, but also in the Humanities and Social Sciences in general, the term ‘international’ seems to have lost ground over the past two decades whenever historical issues are addressed that cannot be confined within the category of the national. In particular due to the postcolonial turn in many fields, the term ‘transnational’ has emerged as a guiding concept. The difference between the two terms, however, is not always clearly defined.

In general, there seems to be a tendency that the terms ‘transnational’ and ‘transcultural’ are used to explicitly mark that one does not take the modern Western nation-state for granted, especially when areas or periods are studied in which the Western concept of nation and nation-state were not the most relevant institutions in the organisation of society. This explains the broad application of the term among (media) historians who study non-European history, history before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as its adaptation in post-colonial studies.

Historically, the distinction between the terms ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ was already formulated in the 1930s in areas such as law and economy.¹ In the 1960s, it became more formalised, ‘when a group of international relations scholars defined their approach in terms of “transnational relations” as opposed to “international relations”, the latter being considered to refer chiefly to interstate relations, while the former was used to address non-governmental interactions across national borders (Saunier 2009, 1051). While such a relatively clear-cut distinction cannot be found in most other areas, it does point towards a difference between, on the one hand, an international sphere where actors representing national entities meet (as, for instance, in an international film festival or in an international federation such as the FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives), where national film archives work together), and on the other hand a more informal, non-institutionalised one.²

In contemporary film studies, the term ‘transnational’ seems to figure as an umbrella term for various kinds of such informal and non-institutionalised encounters. The term appears in studies that investigate the transfer of a cultural product produced in or clearly originating in country A to country B. It is also applied in comparisons of the consumption and reception of a film in various countries. Furthermore, ‘transnational’ also appears in studies of interdependent relations and mutual influence between, for example, filmmaking and audiences. In this case, whereas the term ‘international’ seems to suggest more openness with respect to the (potentially) involved actors, the term ‘transnational’ tends to refer rather to relations between a limited number of actors under investigation. But in other cases, the term ‘transnational’ is explicitly chosen over the term ‘international’ to indicate a questioning of supposed certainties about national origins and identities; such studies often conclude by uncovering the ideology and discursive construction behind those supposed certainties.

Another difference between the ‘international’ and the ‘transnational’ concerns the fact that the realm of the transnational may consist of entities that are less stable and cut across established boundaries, describing dynamics as such without necessarily categorising the entities involved in these dynamics. In their introduction to an edited volume on

transnational memory, Chiara Di Cesari and Ann Rigney conclude ‘that the term “transnational”, although not without its own shortcomings...., seemed best suited to approach the multi-layered, multi-sited, and multi-directional dynamic that we are hoping to capture’ (Di Cesari and Rigney 2014, 4).

Following these lines of argument, the advantages to be gained from the term ‘transnational’ in contrast to ‘international’ would be at least twofold: it concerns relations other than those between nation-states, and it can address these relations as dynamic.³ Such relations can, in addition, be very complex interactions between actors who sometimes are not easy to categorise in terms of national or cultural identity. So it is not very surprising that the term ‘transnational cinema’ is often used to designate phenomena such as diasporic, exilic, ‘hyphenated’, ‘accented’, or migrant cinemas, in particular from the last two or three decades.⁴ To what extent is the term or concept of the ‘transnational’, then, a productive one for historical film and media studies?

Although transnationality can thus be distinguished in a certain sense from internationality, it seems a rather vexed issue to elucidate the term in a positive way, or to at least circumscribe the semantic field it is supposed to cover with more precision. Even the editors of *Transnational Cinemas* refrain from entering into the ‘thorny issue of definition’ in order to not fall into an ‘essentialist trap, whereby complexities are flattened in the search for over-simplified answers’ (Shaw and de la Garza 2010, 3), obviously convinced that not giving such a definition is the best way of steering clear of essentialism. While there certainly is a danger of falling prey to an all-too-narrow normative attitude when trying to circumscribe an apparently very pluralistic academic field, the vagueness of the semantic field circumscribed by the term ‘transnational’ ends up mitigating its conceptual force to little more than a distancing from nationalism and nationalist ideologies.⁵

All of this, however, made our task to find a way to characterise the kind of studies we want to present in this issue of *Early Popular Visual Culture* all the more difficult. In order to get a grip on the ‘numerous cases in turn-of-the century visual culture, where viewers consume still and moving images in contexts and settings that can no longer be addressed in terms of a bilateral relationship between a point of origin (production) and a point of consumption (reception)’ (Call for Papers for this issue), the authors themselves use different terms, chosen more or less pragmatically and pinpointing specific aspects of the objects or situations they study. Some in fact prefer the prefix ‘cross-’ to ‘trans-’, either to emphasise their comparative approach or to point to the fact that the phenomena studied are inherently connected from the beginning (instead of taking clearly distinct unities as a starting point that are subsequently mixed in a ‘transcultural exchange’). This, to some extent, resonates with the approach of *histoire croisée*, even though none of the contributors explicitly follows its methodological precepts as presented by historians Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2006). The prefix ‘cross-’ here refers to ‘a point of intersection where events may occur that are capable of affecting to various degrees the elements present depending on their resistance, permeability or malleability, and on their environment’ (37). The notion of ‘intersection’ is indeed a productive one, when looking at the four studies collected in this issue.

So rather than taking a top-down approach to see whether the kind of research collected here corresponds to a theoretical or methodological framework established in a neighbouring discipline, let us look at what is at stake in these studies. What are the phenomena they are analysing? What are the perspectives they choose? What are the perspectives they aim

to overcome? A first point to be made is that even though the textuality of individual films is addressed in three of the contributions, it is not the central issue of these studies. It is, precisely, the intersection of filmic texts and specific environments that forms the central focus of interrogation. Secondly, in all four of them the national does play a role, but the category of 'national cinema' would seem to be rather inadequate to deal with the questions raised by the authors. In fact, they look into aspects that are more often than not neglected by national film histories: the circulation and reception of foreign films and the activities of non-nationals within a given national film culture. Thirdly, in all of the texts the issue of border crossing is indeed a central one. Whether with respect to people or films, images or discourses, devices or business strategies, border crossing leads to encounters and intersections in which meanings are renegotiated, appropriated or rejected, modified and adapted.

Dafna Ruppin and Nadi Tofighian study the circulation of various American Biograph machines in Southeast Asia, in particular the former Dutch colonies in present-day Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia around 1900. The multiple nationalities of the companies as well as the role the highlighting or downplaying of the 'American-ness' of the device played in the marketing of the shows, the elasticity of the denomination 'biograph' and the framing of the programmes in relation to the audiences reveal the complexities of the emergence of a new entertainment medium in a context characterised by ethnic, cultural, social and also national hybridity.

In his contribution, Matthew Solomon describes Georges Méliès' strategies to establish himself as a transnational filmmaker whose films were to circulate world-wide. Solomon looks at Méliès' strategies, but also the difficulties his ambitions had to face, including the illegal copying of his films by local competitors. Looking at the case of *La Légende de Rip van Vinckle* (1905), released in the United States under the title *Rip's Dream*, Solomon discusses how a film with a specifically national subject-matter was produced in such a way that it could circulate internationally without the prints having to be altered.

During the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–12, members of the international press accused Italian soldiers of having committed war crimes against the Arab population in Libya. Giorgio Bertellini analyses how these reports were viewed in the United States, where the Italian immigrant press tried to react against these accusations and shows how actualities about the conflict produced by Italian companies were used to try and influence American public opinion in favour of the Italians, with the corporate press mostly adopting a relatively neutral, sometimes even pro-Italian stance. Bertellini goes on to show that fiction films about Roman antiquity could also be framed in such a way as to produce a favourable portrait of the Italian campaign in Libya.

Klaas de Zwaan and Adrian Gerber contribute a comparative study of the reception in the neutral countries of Switzerland and the Netherlands of the Vitagraph production *Battle Cry of Peace* (J. Stuart Blackton and Wilfred North, 1915), during World War I. A very violent film taking an openly anti-pacifist attitude, the film encountered film audiences in Switzerland and the Netherlands, who themselves experienced tensions within their own populations, where sympathies could lean towards either side of the parties in the conflict. This resulted in very complex negotiations between the official politics of neutrality in both countries and the sometimes unruly spectators, and at the same time the specific conditions in both countries led to interesting differences in the reception of the film.

A common denominator of these contributions thus is their focus on the circulation of films and the kinds of encounters they produce or are supposed to produce with local,

regional or even national audiences. They are concerned with histories of reception, do partly draw upon insights produced by the so-called ‘new cinema history’ (without necessarily situating themselves within this context)⁶ and also look at individual films, but without using textual analysis to produce readings of them. What they do, in other words, is pay attention to the international dimension of early cinema by studying examples of transnational circulation and cross-cultural encounters between films and audiences.⁷

Notes

1. For a historical overview of uses of the term ‘transnational’, see Saunier 2009.
2. Another aspect, though not one that is explicitly mentioned, appears to be that in cases such as international associations or federations the number of nation-states participating is not limited and in principle at least all have the same status, whereas a the term ‘transnational’ seems to refer to a situation in which there is a limited number of actors, which in addition may hold different positions.
3. In this respect, many, if not most of the contributions to Albera and Cosandey 1995 could be said to address issues of transnationality rather than internationality in early cinema.
4. For a historical overview presenting different conceptions of transnational cinema, see Higbee and Lim 2010.
5. Higbee and Lim, in the same first issue of the journal *Transnational Cinemas*, already call for ‘a form of what we call “critical transnationalism” [which] might help us interpret more productively the interface between global and local, national and transnational, as well as moving away from a binary approach to national/transnational and from a Eurocentric tendency of how such films might be read’ (2010, 10). While Higbee and Lim refer here to the reading of specific films, the idea of an ‘interface between global and local, national and transnational’ is undoubtedly broader in scope, but it has the obvious disadvantage that the ‘transnational’ appears as an overarching term and at the same time as one of the elements that are part of the interface that critical transnationalism seeks to interpret.
6. See Maltby, Biltereyst, and Meers 2011.
7. The idea to put together this issue of *EPVC* originated from the research project ‘The Nation and Its Other: the Emergence of Modern Popular Imagery and Representations’ (2010–14, <http://nation-other.wp.hum.uu.nl/>) at Utrecht University, funded by the Dutch National Research Organisation (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek) .

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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with Nanna Verhoeff he edited *Networks of Entertainment. Early Film Distribution 1895–1915* (John Libbey, 2007). He also published *Mise en scène* (caboose 2014).

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