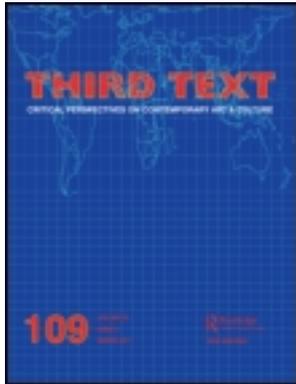


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Transnational Feminism in Film and Media

Sandra Ponzanesi

The edited volume of *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* is a rare jewel that successfully reaches different scholarly communities at the same time, but also opens up spaces beyond the purely academic debate. It builds bridges between the rich and ever-changing field of transnational feminism and the more established and entrenched field of film and media studies, thereby creating a new understanding of the global world through the close analysis of significant films, TV, art installations, video art and visual culture, broadening the understanding of media culture as such. One of the major concepts at the core of the various essays in this book is the engagement with the idea of moving boundaries, borders and bodies across traditional disciplinary divides and territorial disputes. Migration, mobility and transnationalism are indeed key concepts that help rethink, or better unthink, ossified notions of nations, identities and belonging beyond the issue of mere representation. By paying attention to shifting power relations, the notion of 'transnationalism' is transformed from a fuzzy, slippery and catch-all term into an embodied, material and dynamic term. Transnationalism is conveyed as both empowering

and disenfranchising, a new pointer of global dynamics where inequalities and differences coexist in a mixed-blessing relationship.

Thanks to its innovative intersectional and interdisciplinary approach, this wide range of essays deals with the cinema and media of the border beyond traditional labels of minority, migrant or third world feminism or cinema, in search of new spaces that allow for more encompassing forms of solidarity and inclusion. Divided into three sections, 'New Frontiers of Migration', 'Circulation of Bodies' and 'Modalities of Foreignness', the volume puts forward a thought-provoking and refreshing analysis of the transformed understanding of migration, borders and media that has shifted in focus from the postcolonial subjects to new racialised others: Muslims, refugees and asylum seekers who reshape notions of East/West, North/South, but also of Europeanness through a focus on Eastern Europe, linking questions of transnationalism to postcoloniality and postsocialism. Whereas the field of transnational feminism, though contested, is rich and thriving thanks to the work of critics such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Cynthia Enloe and Jacqui Alexander, to name but a few, the field of transnational media studies is still relatively scattered and fragmented. If we leave aside the notable work of Ella Shohat who has championed the study of multiculturalism and postcoloniality in cinema and media by critiquing notions of Eurocentrism and Western paradigms of analysis, very little has been published that manages to problematise physical motion, virtual mediations and transnational belonging all at the same time. The seminal book by Hamid Naficy on accented cinema also achieves a breakthrough for a definition of exilic and diasporic cinema that is not just thematic and topical but also aesthetic and conceptual by engaging with questions of production and distribution. However, the intersection with transnational feminism is not always brought to the fore, neither is the reflection on transnational media as going beyond cinema and encompassing other artistic outings such as video and border art. As Ginette Verstraete remarks, the transnational feminist approach that she envisions pays more attention to the crucial differences between women posing as subjects and those presented as objects, as well as to the continuities of power that exist between feminist producers and consumers on the one hand, and the very flow of capital and information that we criticise on the other.

As Etienne Balibar argues, borders are no longer conceived primarily as lines marking the edges of given national territories, but more as new multiple



Jula and Nara: interview with post-Soviet prostitutes in Trabzon, Turkey; still from Ursula Biemann, *Black Sea Files*, video essay in ten parts: files 0–9, forty-three minutes, 2004–2005, courtesy the artist

internal borders which are ethnicised, racialised and politicised. Borders are not just marked by detention zones, holding areas, checkpoints, high fences, surveillance cameras and high-tech barriers, but also by what Judith Butler defines as ‘unlivable and uninhabitable’ zones of social life that are nevertheless ‘densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject’.¹ This is in line with what Anzaldúa suggests – that some of the most ‘uncrossable borders’ are delineated not by national geographies but by economic, class, gender, ethnic, and/or religious differences within the borders of the nation-states (see *Borderlands*, 1987). The challenge of Western film-makers is therefore, as Bruce Bennett and Imogen Tyler express it, to represent the ‘intimate others of globalization’ (34) in ways that attend to the specificity and materiality of lived experiences of borders and problematise, rather than reinforce,

dominant Western tropes of visibility.² This implies the difficult task of avoiding the fetishisation of the other, by universalising the condition of displacement, such as that enacted by the refugee described by Giorgio Agamben, as something we all experience. Such generalisation, universalisation and tokenism are subtly and carefully avoided in the many original analyses given in these wide-ranging essays that propose, from new feminist and interdisciplinary perspectives, the close reading of more widely received films with more unknown and forgotten ones.

Babel (2006) by Alejandro González Iñárritu is introduced by the editors as an exemplary transnational movie that challenges and questions old and new global borders, reshuffled after 9/11 by a new economic and political emergency; *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (directed by Joel Zwick, 2002) and *Spanglish*



Ambivalences surrounding the media technologies used to track, monitor and ‘sense’ women’s bodies from a distance; still from Ursula Biemann, *Remote Sensing*, video essay, 2001, fifty-three minutes, courtesy the artist

(directed by James L Brooks, 2004) are analysed by Katarzyna Marciniak as enhancing ethnicity for commercial and consumer purposes, defined as ‘palatable otherness’, a form of confection and distribution that proposes a blend of exotic otherness without really challenging stereotypes and the status quo. The book also examines other films such as *In This World* (2002) and *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006) made by the acclaimed British director Michael Winterbottom and described by Bennett and Tyler as border cinema. However, along with the more recognisable and disputed films, the book also features analyses of a series of less widely distributed films: art house films such as *The Last Resort* (directed by Pawel Pawlikowski, 2009) and the unsettling *Lilya 4-ever* (directed by Lukas Moodysson, 2002) are analysed by Alice Mihaela Bardan as postsocialist transnational journeys; Maghrebi films such as *The Sleeping Child*

(directed by Yasmine Kassari, 2004) are analysed by Patricia Pisters through a Deleuzian lens which emphasises the concept of becoming-woman by also circumventing Deleuze’s notion of minor cinema; Anikó Imre engages with a sophisticated reading of *Pusztá Cowboy* (directed by Katrin Kremmler), a film made in 2004 by the Budapest Lesbian Collective forwarding the ambivalence towards the nation by combining postcommunism and activism with transnationalism and queer criticism and therefore breaking down the taken-for-granted binarism between the West and the Third World and bringing into the picture different forms of diversified and alternative global sisterhood. Áine O’Healy fascinates with a wealth of new interesting but understudied migrant films in Italian, by sculpting new precious and useful theoretical concepts such as the sadistic logic of portraying female migrants as mute and

innocent victims who are also gazed at as alluring sexualised objects (described as wounded bodies from the East). Beyond the theme of abjection, she also describes carnivalisation as a possible way of reversing migrant asymmetries and proposing a reversal of stereotypical representations. Other esteemed readings are offered by Lan Duong on transnational popular Vietnamese cinema in the form of *Long-Legged Girls* (directed by Vo Ngoc Dang, 2004), and by Priya Jaikumar who gives a magnificent account of *Silent Waters* (2003), a film by Pakistani film-maker Sabiha Sumar. This film proposes a different kind of transnationalism, based on a metropolitan cosmopolitanism, in which feminism is called upon to trespass notions of religion and secularism, identity politics and human rights, individual and community values. Marguerite Waller's enthralling analysis of Ibolya Fekete's *Chico* (2001) embeds all the paradoxes and complications of transnational subjectivities and identities, from Latin America to the postsocialist world, intertwined and embedded with each other in ways that often skip the eyes of internationalist thinkers. Though films and cinema advance the dominant paradigm of analysis for the new understanding of transnationalism in its engagement with feminist questions, art installations and video also play an important part. The *Videographies* of video artist and video activist Ursula Biemann beautifully and painfully expose the underbelly of the global village where mobility and fluidity are deeply entrenched with illegality, racism, forced migration, xenophobia and trafficking. *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media* is a breathtaking and a painstakingly confronting journey of ideas, images and visions fighting and clashing for a world in which borders are not eliminated but which are at times displaced, suspended and reinvented from subaltern yet at times empowering positions.

Transnational Feminism in Film and Media, edited by Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre and Áine O'Healy, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007

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NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993, quoted in Bruce Bennett and Imogen Tyler, 'Screening Unlivable Lives: The Cinema of Borders' in *Transnational Feminism and Media*, Katarzyna Marciniak, Anikó Imre and Áine O'Healy, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2007, p 21
2. Kimberly A Chang and L H M Ling, 'Globalization and Its Intimate Other: Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong', in Marianne H Marchand and Anne Sisson Runyan, eds, *Gender and Global Restructuring: Sightings, Sites and Resistances*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000, quoted in Bennett and Tyler, op cit