The global city and cities in globalization

Globalization is a process that generates contradictory spaces, characterized by contestation, internal differentiation, and continuous border crossings. The global city is emblematic of this condition.

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Learning objectives

- Understand the dynamics of globalization
- Comprehend the changes of cities in the context of globalization, particularly in regard to global networks and the changing meaning of topography
- Examine the characteristics of funding, production, distributions, themes, and narratives in transnational cinema
- Be aware of thematic clusters of transnational cinema, such as migration, illegal labor,sex traffic, transnational love stories

Introduction

This lecture addresses the relationship between cinema, the city, and globalization. In order to tease out the links that connect film to the representation of urban centers in the era of globalization this chapter outlines the current understanding of globalization, highlighting the role of cultural production in global circulation, on the one hand, and the status of the city, on the other. The chapter then accounts for different cinematic responses to globalization and discusses selected films addressing the ways in which globalization engenders particular narratives and constructs a global city.

The global city has become "a central location for capital exchange – a central node in a vast, multinational network of capital and labor flow". Transnational cinema addresses the global flow of labor and culture in its representations of metropolitan areas that have emerged in globalization. Global cities provide settings for narratives about migration, but the cinematic representation of global cities also offers new global versions of older tropes associated with the city, such as alienation, now reflected in the representation of tourists, business travelers, and the displacement of migrants within global networks.

What is globalization?

Globalization "denotes the processes through which sovereign national actors are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects for power, orientations, identities, and networks". Increasingly the movement around the globe of capital and products is enabled so that cultural products are available in countries other than their nation of origin (Short and Kim). John Rennie Short and Yeong-Hyun Kim differentiate between economic globalization, cultural globalization, and political globalization, but maintain that globalization's greatest effect is in the sphere of finance

The power of the nation–state has been weakened, and market-driven agents compete with national governments in the processes of transnational trade. Short and Kim correctly observe that the analysis of globalization has focused on economics and that issues of global culture have been subordinated to discussions about economic and social processes of globalization. Global cinema relies on multinational funding, production, and distribution, in contrast to national cinema, where national funding, national culture, and a national audience were in place and taken for granted. Paradoxically, it is the development of globalization that has led to a more thorough interest in the conditions of national cinema.

Transnational cinema

Film is part of the global flow of cultural products and also represents globalization visually and narratively. A detailed outline of transnational funding and distribution structures would exceed the parameters of this chapter, but paradoxically, studies of that kind have appeared primarily in national film studies contexts (see, for example, Halle).

Transnational processes of production, such as co-production as part of bilateral agreements or cultural agreements like the European Union and the international reception through wide circulation of films, offer opportunities for creative exchange beyond national frameworks of production, reception, and interpretation in a global world. While some see the effect of globalization on cinema as an increase of the hegemony of Hollywood at the expense of all other national cinemas.

The relationship between place and culture has changed; culture has in many respects become deterritorialized, which means that cultural artefacts do not have singular places of origination to which they are beholden. Globalization is an uneven phenomenon, and the distinct national film industries have different kinds of access to production funds and world markets. Hollywood films dominate, while smaller film industries have a harder time being produced and distributed, yet all film industries have undergone change under globalization.

Now filmmakers from national cinemas are also influenced by global visual culture. Chapter 7 has illustrated this shift with films that depict African-American ghettos in the context of the USA to the circulation of the transnational ghetto film that is exported from the USA to other countries, localized, and then reproduced and globally recirculated as national product from South Africa (Tsotsi), Brazil (City of God), or Germany (Fatih Akın's Short Sharp Shock, 1998).

Filmgoers consume films from all over the world, but particularly Hollywood cinema. Filmmakers' narratives, and their thematic and aesthetic sensibilities are influenced by films from outside their national cinemas. More often filmmakers are trained abroad and multi-national funding is tied to multi-national narratives, forcing filmmakers to tell stories about border-crossings.

Films about globalization address a range of issues. Documentary films address the effects of globalization on the Jamaican economy, as in Stephanie Black's Life and Debt (2001) and Raoul Peck's Profit and Nothing But! Or Impolite Thoughts on the Class Struggle (2001); the dreams and hopes of crossing the border from Mexico to the US, as in Chantal Akerman's From the Other Side (2002); and the killing of women in Ciudad Juarez, a Mexican–American border town with maquiladoras, foreign-owned assembly plants, as in Lordes Portillo's Senorita Extraviada (2001), and Ursula Biemann's Performing the Border (1999).

Feature films include narrativizations of multiple border crossings, including the Polish–German border, as in Hans-Christian Schmid's Lights (2003); stories about war refugees in makeshift refugee camps, as in Bahman Ghobadi's Turtles Can Fly (2004); traveling businessmen who encounter foreign landscapes, as in Sue Brooks's Japanese Story (2003); and displaced tourists, as in Sofia Coppola's Lost in Translation (2003). These films highlight different kinds of cinematic spaces than we have encountered in the preceding examples: the borderlands, maquiladoras, the makeshift refugee camp, and the global city.

It is important to differentiate between films that are produced for a global market and independently produced films that both address globalization and circulate in global networks, even if in less powerful ones.

Globalization manifests itself in cities, especially in the large global metropol. It affects "major metropolitan centers of international finance and business – cities like Tokyo, New York, Paris, Hong Kong, and Berlin" on the one hand, but also the "spaces and places between and beneath major urban centers" on the other (Petro and Krause). Short and Kim argue that the unevenness of globalization leads to "[m]any developing countries in Africa and Latin America [with] extremes of wealth and poverty . . . coexisting in the same city".

An extraordinary illustration of this is to be found in Ra'anan Alexandrowicz's film James' Journey to Jerusalem (2003), which is this chapter's case study. The migrants and illegal laborers portrayed in the film travel through and into the wealth of the city, while they live in a neighborhood that lacks any kind of infrastructure.

Petro and Krause focus on the ways in which "global networks" are "experienced locally," which can mean in small or large cities as well as rural spaces. In this digital age, however, Saskia Sassen argues that the "built topography" is "increasingly inadequate" to represent cities (2003). The digitalization of culture exceeds the traditional accounts of topographic representation that cannot capture the new forms that power takes in globalization.

The topographic representation of poor areas of a city portrays only the physical aspects of poverty, and Sassen suggests that the "dominant interpretation" of globalization and digitalization posits "an absolute disembedding from the material world," in short "that place no longer matters" (2003). Against these kinds of simplified understandings of globalization, Sassen argues for "new types of spatializations of power" (2003). Most visual texts discussed in this chapter are traditional films and as such are indebted to the realistic representation of space and place. They show that the distribution of power manifests itself in the spaces of globalization.

Remote Sensing

I begin here with a more radical example of a visual response to globalization that is not indebted to the realistic recreation of a cinematic city within a narrative of global movement, but rather appropriates digital culture for an avant-garde video that places cities as part of migratory routes of women in the transnational sex trade. Ursula Biemann's video essay Remote Sensing (2001) contrasts the digital depiction of routing and rerouting bodies around the world with the practice of geographic remote sensing that allows for both global surveillance, on the one hand, and the fantasy of a borderless, global world, on the other.

Remote Sensing brings together several topics that tend to be segregated in discourses on globalization: sexuality and economics, national histories and transnational memories, the national and the global, scientific accounts of geography and the experience of global movement and place. It connects different accounts of the routes that women travel in the global sex industry using NASA satellite images.

Remote Sensing captures the complexity of women's multiple and multi-directional migratory routes without claiming to be a comprehensive account the global trade of sex, false adoption, and marriage. The movement described is not limited to movement from an imagined periphery to an imagined center, such as from one country to Switzerland, Germany, or Europe for that matter, which would reproduce a Eurocentric worldview.

Instead, the video tracks women traveling from Thailand to Tokyo, Russia to Korea and Israel, from Cambodia, Laos, and Burma/Myanmar to Thailand, from Eastern to Western Europe, from Nigeria to Germany, Vietnam to China, and from Latin America to the USA. To emphasize the multi-national multi-directionality, a section of the video entitled "Filipinas in Nigeria: A Case of Re-Routing," highlights the story of two women who are involuntarily trafficked to Nigeria and take years to return home to the Philippines.

Remote Sensing integrates two aspects of globalization that seem to be at odds with one another: the time–space compression, which makes borders and nations seem to disappear, and the traffick in bodies, which move through national spaces and thus highlight the space of the nation and its borders. Biemann's video creates memories without borders that circulate globally and are not bound by a single national imaginary. This video essay engages the digitalizing effects of globalization with its local material manifestations.

Global cinematic topographies of the city

Transnational films integrate the topography of metropolitan areas with the transnational movement of characters. The flow of finances hardly provides material that can be translated into the visual medium of film, so transnational cinema shows metropolitan areas in different countries connected by the various aspects of globalization: labor migration, international tourism, transnational commodification, postcolonialism, transnational education, transnational capital, and the transnational sale of body parts.

Connected by narrative topics and representations of the city as a space of alienation and solidarity, the films show the visible effects of globalization and its subcultural and submerged illegal underside.

Films attempting to capture the manifestations of global flows in the visual representation of concrete space and the built environment negotiate the relationship between the local and the global. Sassen explains that what we might experience as local – for example in the built environment that surrounds us – functions in reality as a "microenvironment with global span," because it is globally connected through different kinds of networks (2003).

Films such as Stephen Frears's Dirty Pretty Things (2002) and James' Journey to Jerusalem (2003) represent the built environment of material sites criss-crossed by movement. Dirty Pretty Things employs the setting of a hotel as the place where migrants' bodies are harvested and their organs sold. The film transforms the local space into a disturbingly disconnected, decontextualized hotel in an unnamed city to capture the simultaneous local manifestation of globalization and the increasing independence of locations form their local context. This alienation is different from that of Weimar cinema and film noir, in which the cinematic topography creates a whole city.

This new global cinema answers the question of how to cinematically capture the relationship of local and global, as described by Sassen: "The local now transacts directly with the global – the global installs itself in locals, and the global is itself constituted through a multiplicity of locals" (2003)

Ethnoscapes of tourism

The globalization theorist Arjun Appadurai argues that it is "electronic mediation and mass migration" that particularly mark the present moment of globalization and enable the "work of imagination" that we see reflected in global cinema . To discuss the shifting spaces, real and imagined, that constitute the global world, he coined the term "ethnoscape," defined as "the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live," including "tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers".

These kinds of ethnoscapes are often recreated in the cinematic representation of global cities inhabited by people moving transnationally into, out of, and through them.

Sofia Coppola's Lost in Translation (2003) creates such an ethnoscape of upscale tourist and business travelers in Tokyo, Japan. The film's main character, American actor Bob Harris, visits Tokyo to shoot a commercial. In his hotel he repeatedly runs into fellow American Charlotte who is staying there with her husband, a photographer. Charlotte, who is significantly younger than Bob, is alone in the hotel for long stretches of time while her husband is out on photography shoots. The narrative is loosely tied together by Bob and Charlotte meeting and spending time together in the city.

Most of the film shows episodes of activities that tourists engage in when they are staying in hotels, such as sitting in the bar, listening to jazz, swimming in the hotel pool, and listening to tapes in the hotel room. On occasions, they venture outside, sometimes alone, sometimes together, sometimes at a voyeuristic distance to the surroundings, sometimes engaging with friends. At the end of the film, they both depart.

The film captures the transnational space of the traveling business class. In so doing, however, it reproduces the septic gaze on foreign nations and cities in which airports, airport shuttles, high-end hotels, and restaurants function. It never allows any deeper understanding of Japanese or Tokyo culture and in that process relies not only on the dominance of Hollywood to produce images and representations of other countries but also on older stereotypes of the city in general as a space of random, superficial encounters and Asianness as indecipherable for Westerners.

The film's limited dialogue and action create a sense of paralysis and sleepwalking for the audience, with no anchoring space except for the hotel bar. Ultimately the Japanese seem shallow and curious, perceived only through the alienated gaze of two displaced characters, a lonely young woman and an equally lost older man who happen to share a common language and culture. Taking into account that English is the dominant language of globalization, the film's statement about the possible productive outcomes of global exchange is rather hopeless, positing meaningful human contact only in English.

Migration: legal and illegal

Legal and illegal migration is a pre-eminent topic addressed in transnational cinema. In France films identified by Peter Bloom as beur cinèma show stories about migrants on the continuum of illegal and legal migration and residence in Marseilles and Paris. Such films – consider Madhi Charel's Tea in the Harem (1985), Karim Dridi's Bye-Bye (1995), and Mathieu Kassovitz's Café au lait (1993) and Hate (1995) – portray life among North African and Caribbean migrants in French cities, sometimes moving back and forth between the country of origin and the host country.

Several of these films overlap with the lecture on the ghetto and barrio, evidence that globalization is not an entirely new phenomenon but rather a radical break that has led to an intensification of phenomena, such as migration. Hamid Naficy has proposed the term "accented cinema" for those kinds of films that share aesthetic features in conjunction with narratives of migration, exile, and diaspora. Accented cinema in Britain includes Damien O'Dennell's East Is East (1999) and Gurinder Chadha's Bend It Like Beckham (2002), which addresses the Indian and Pakistani communities in Britain.

Germany has also seen an explosion of Turkish–German cinema in the last decade, including Fatih Akın's Short Sharp Shock (1998), In July (2000), Solino (2002), and Head-On (2004), and Thomas Arslan's Brothers and Sisters (1997). Sassen, in contrast to many other economic theorists of globalization, emphasizes the alternative use that minorities can make of the city: "Those who lack power – those who are disadvantaged, who are outsiders, who are members of minorities that have been subjected to discrimination – can gain presence in global cities, presence vis-à-vis power and presence vis-à-vis each other"