

Week 23: What Is Poetic Realism? (*Le Jour se lève*, Marcel Carné, 1939). Readings by Andrew, Georges Altman, Turim.

Week 24: The Limits of the Nation-State and the Road to Vichy (*La Règle du jeu*, Renoir, 1939). Reading by Andrew Higson.

## Notes

1. Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1.
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2d ed. (London: New Left Books, 1991).

## Screening the Nation: Rethinking Options

by Toby Miller

**What Is Wrong.** It is best to begin by clearing our minds of cant. The literature on and teaching of national cinemas need an overhaul. They frequently fail to consider the following key areas that should be prerequisites to any book or course on the subject: (1) the voluminous political and social history and social theory on the nation, nationalism, and national culture; (2) the empirical nature of the filmgoing experience in the countries discussed; (3) the role of television and video; (4) the significance of cultural policy; (5) the role of local cultural bourgeoisies; and (6) the condition of screen labor.

In place of these topics, we get, respectively: (1) automatic use of Benedict Anderson, presumably because his notion of an imagined community is thought to suit the antimaterialist agenda of textuality (wrong move in terms of his argument, but not to worry)—this may be accompanied by attributing the conceptualization and naming of "Orientalism" to Edward Said (wrong dating by a century, but not to worry); (2) vague references to U.S. imports as a damned "other"; (3) textual analysis of films that may never or rarely have been seen as such in the countries under discussion; (4) dismissal of cultural bureaucrats in favor of heroic auteurs or collectives, because artists are privileged over governments; (5) sketchy accounts of why cultural imperialism has been displaced by globalization as an explanatory framework; and (6) star studies. These are all useful approaches, in that they mimic the alibis used to justify national cinemas, but they are insufficient as political-economic-textual-anthropological accounts.

I have conducted no survey of curricular or other teaching methods to support these provocations.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, there are honorable exceptions. My intention is to alert readers of *Cinema Journal* to the problems we should confront and to propose some ways forward. I offer below an account of the cultural nation, followed by a set of questions we should pose in organizing our literature and our curricula on the subject of national cinema.

**The Cultural Nation.** Where is the cultural nation? It is hardly an empirical audience arrayed in front of the screen as before the flag at a citizenship ceremony. Binding people together through culture is a concept derived from social and political theory and public policy as well as from the news media and everyday life. Although not as easy to identify as states, which can be marked out in legal terms, nations are multiplying. We live in an international age that by its very formulation decrees that we are also in a national one. The nation is a means of identification with persons and places beyond the horizon but not so far distant as to be foreign. It may be founded on genetics and/as history, or it may exist despite either or both of these on the basis of policy, perhaps a postcolonial hangover of boundaries drawn to suit metropolitan bureaucrats and industrialists. It may be complicated by all of the above, and it can be a matter either of settled agreement or collective anxiety. Given these differences, how can we render analytically useful so slippery a term of belonging? Why should “everyone” want to form nations, just as the more dystopic and utopic among us insist on their obsolescence in a new era of global capital? And how do we deal with such a “dirty” object for the left, one associated with the worst chauvinisms?

We must deal with it as a seemingly unified form that needs decomposing each time it is applied to particular circumstances. Billy Bragg has pointed to the need for his English national pride to sit alongside his internationalism and his socialism. This might appear regressive given that country’s sorry history of imperialism. Bragg gives three counters to such a position. First, backing away from nationalism offers the right wing a monopoly on the ownership and control of patriotism. Second, a multicultural agenda should include appreciation of both host and donor cultures. And finally, there is a trend toward nationalism across the United Kingdom that is politically progressive everywhere other than England, because of the left’s squeamishness about the topic.<sup>2</sup> As Tom Nairn paradoxically remarks, “Small is not only beautiful but has teeth too (speaking both technically and politically).” This is the difference between the apparently outmoded “medieval particularism” of small nationalism that Lenin derided and the really rather modish “nonlogical, untidy, refractory, disintegrative, particularistic truth of nation-states,” for 1989 made medieval particularism the future.<sup>3</sup> Our contemporary moment references intra- and transnationalism, with diasporic subjects and First Peoples gathering political momentum.

Of course, the rather mystic talk of “home” and “national culture” always has an alpha (and frequently an omega) in government. In European history and its postcolonial hangover, the state articulates the nation through the right to certify public historical memorials, decree celebratory dates, and set educational agendas—in short, to instantiate materially the supposed spirit that dwells in a people and reproduce it. The paradox is that although this spirit gives the state legitimacy, the state reserves the right to name and monitor it. Nations are always coterminous with systems of government. Even as the nation is manufactured, it is said to exist already, an authentic essence of statehood and peoplehood.

This genre of collective identity was achieved through the spread of the printed word using local forms of European language after the sixteenth century. It came

to represent political sovereignty, displacing the religious one communicated via Christian Latin's previous monopoly on the book. Market and state literatures opened up the prospect of simultaneity, of knowing people like oneself could be reading identical texts at another place but at the same moment. There was a similar iconographic change. The era of sacred internationalism had produced images that elided time and space by denying the passage of history. They represented the foundational Christian myth as a spectacle that was always contemporary and local. Medieval European paintings of the crucifixion depicted medieval European people gazing at Jesus. For audiences such as these, time was coming to a rapturously cataclysmic end. Sacred power would be witnessed firsthand, as at a Second Coming.

For us, this is anachronistic. Our sense of the simultaneous is of events occurring at the same moment in different places. But chronotopic logic was not available then. Past, present, and future were essentially one. Now we distinguish between them to delineate shared national cultural history. This change took place because two new forms of writing translated the old sense of time into a modern order and came to characterize European life in the eighteenth century. These were the media of the novel and the newspaper. Anderson thinks they made it possible to imagine a nation through the invention of "meanwhile," a term to describe action taking place elsewhere but also now; part of our world as connected individuals looking at a text but not available to us at a single site.<sup>4</sup> Documentary film, the newsreel, Internet discussion groups, and TV current affairs are twentieth-century equivalents, hence the panics over electronic culture that characterize the discourses of cultural imperialism and protectionism. The expressive interiority attached to such national sentiment legitimizes public education, displacing oral language via writing. The idea is to span distance and difference in the very way popular culture binds people who have never met and do not expect to do so. Identity becomes transferable through literacy and a formal method of educating people.

At the same time, it would be silly to endow these developments with the happy face of functionalist sociology, whereby the organs of the state and commerce work together to meet social needs, or a Whiggish idea of self-determination, a teleological unfurling of liberty. For this very period is equally one of intense differentiation. Industrial culture divides as it rationalizes, creating diffuse collective identities as well as officially endorsed ones. Inside certain democratic forms, this is a relatively cozy arrangement, but under different circumstances it can be something else.

After the First World War, as national self-determination was proving to be panacea, placebo, and disorder all at once, it was conventional to assume three material bases to the nation: race, as a source of human identification; environment, as both physical border and internal geography; and population, as a set of statistical norms. Although the first and second terms were conceived as natural divisions (although never encountered as such, given the political venality of racism and inevitable struggles over resources), the idea of the population as an object of care, to be quantified and qualified, modeled and bettered, derived from social theory. This last category, already muddled, is the only one really applicable to the architectonics of nations. It is the alibi and locus of national culture.

The rapid exchange of information held out by audiovisual technology in the twentieth century mirrors an extraordinarily rapid expansion in the rate and extent of human, intellectual, and financial migration. Just as music, radio, TV, video, cinema, and the Web may link nations and blur their differences through the international trade in text and ownership, they also constitute inter- and intranational difference. Such horizontal, technical, and vertical generic developments have always brought debate along with them, because the nation has routinely been for the taking as a group of viewers and listeners. These concerns are amplified and projected in the light of the screen; its mimetic hold drives administrators of the public psyche to apoplectic fits that outdo the impact of written and spoken genres, and even the contemporary demonization accorded to rap music. The nation becomes simultaneously dangerous and vulnerable: worryingly powerful as a set of individual and social actors, apt to undo the fabric of their communities, and peculiarly fragile as a symbol of the very reading and civic collectivities it comprises.

**What Might Be Done.** National cinemas are generally conceived, announced, produced, and archived in reaction to Hollywood or former colonial powers that have ongoing “special relationships.” They tend to be, in that sense, “anticinemas,” even as they demonstrate a familiar set of oppositions internal to their own discourse and practice (cultural versus commercial, local versus international, critical versus celebratory, personal versus generic). The anti-American rubric goes back a long way, and to many of us for whom Hollywood’s sexual and commodity transcendence was a promising sign in repressive or phantasmatic cultures, that rubric is as deeply flawed in its provincialism, moralism, and mediocrity as are local claims for “American exceptionalism.” At the same time, part of the mission of cinema studies must be one of inclusiveness and the expression of difference as well as similarity in ways that both accept and contest market mechanisms and norms. As such, our teaching should acknowledge the policy, distributional, promotional, and exhibitionary protocols of the screen at each national site as much as their textual ones. Enough talk of “economic reductionism” without also problematizing “textual reductionism.” Enough valorization of marginal movements within continents as if they represented any conceivable measure of popular taste. Enough denial of the role of government. For these issues—cultural-industry frameworks, audience experiences, and cultural policy—should be integral to teaching about national cinemas. Let’s also forgo arguments that film must be taught and studied on a 16mm projector—for heaven’s sake, many of the films we valorize were made with TV money to be shown on TV screens.

**Conclusion.** In summary, I propose four foci for our pedagogical work. First, we need to view national cinemas through twin theoretical prisms. On the one hand, they can be understood as the newest component of sovereignty, a twentieth-century cultural addition to ideas of patrimony and rights that sits alongside such traditional topics as territory, language, history, and education. On the other hand, national cinemas are sectors of the culture industries. As such, they are subject to exactly the rent-seeking practices and exclusionary representational protocols that characterize

liaisons between state and capital in the name of the public good. Is the impulse toward having a national cinema crucial to the project of modernity, expanding the vision and availability of “the good life” to include the ability of a people to control its representation on screen? Or is this impulse merely a free ride for the culturalist fraction of a national bourgeoisie? In short, we need to examine the relationship of nation to state. Which agencies are responsible for enunciating the supposed spirit-in-dwelling of a site, and what basis do they use for doing so?

Second, there must be a focus not merely on the texts conventionally cataloged as those of a national cinema but on the actual filmgoing experience of a nation’s citizens. To what extent does the cinema made in their name engage them? (The work of Jeffrey Himpele on Bolivia is exemplary here.)<sup>5</sup>

Third, we ought to interrogate what qualifies under the rubric of national cinema. Many countries began national filmmaking via governmental agencies, concentrating on documentary cinema. But these rarely qualify for our classes, even though they were avowed projects of nation building. It is astonishing that a few select fiction films are allowed to stand in for such projects.

Finally, the political audit we make of a national audiovisual space should focus on the extent to which it is open, both on camera and off, to the demographics of those inhabiting it. No cinema that claims resistance to Hollywood in the name of national specificity is worthy of endorsement if it does not actually attend to sexual and racial minorities and women, along with class politics. Is there a representation of the fullness of the population in the industry and on the screen? If not, then such cultural protectionism is a smokescreen designed to privilege the dominant. Our teaching should move into attack mode on it.

## Notes

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1. Some exemplary studies include Tom O’Regan, *Australian National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1996); Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Krishna Sen, *Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order* (London: Zed Books, 1994); and Robert Stam, *Tropical Multiculturalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).
2. Billy Bragg, “Looking for a New England,” *New Statesman and Society*, March 17, 1995, 14.
3. Tom Nairn, “Internationalism and the Second Coming,” *Daedalus* 122, no. 3 (summer 1993): 157–58.
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 24–25, 28–31; James W. Carey, “The Internet and the End of the National Communication System: Uncertain Predictions of an Uncertain Future,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (spring 1998): 28–34.
5. Jeffrey Himpele, “Film Distribution as Media: Mapping Difference in the Bolivian Cinemascape,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 12, no. 1 (spring 1996): 47–66.