

Book Review

Robert Stam. 2019. *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media: Towards a Transartistic Commons*. New York: Routledge.

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It is evident to everyone across the humanities and social sciences today that the “transnational turn” has become increasingly relevant, if not central, in ongoing theoretical and historiographical academic debates. In the last decade, the field of film and media studies has witnessed a burgeoning wave of contributions that shed light on different understandings of the transnational, including specialized journals such as *Transnational Cinemas* (recently renamed *Transnational Screens*), and myriad books and edited volumes on the topic. Robert Stam has been a pivotal figure in the postcolonial and transnational turn of the discipline, with seminal works such as *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994) and *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (2003), both written with Ella Shohat. In his latest work, *World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media*, the reader will easily recognize the reference to and expansion of many key contributions of the author’s earlier bibliography, and incursions into some of his preferred sites of scholarly inquiry, including the evocation of Mikhail Bakhtin as a powerful theoretical tool to approach contemporary film and media (Stam 1992), Brazilian modernism (Stam 1997), and adaptation studies (Stam 2004), among others. Written with encyclopedic erudition, the book can simultaneously be read as a sophisticated reader or “keyword” reference book providing guidance to navigate an increasing-

ly complex body of academic literature—a genre the author has cultivated in the past (Stam 2000; 2015)—and a much more ambitious essay calling for experimental teaching and research methodologies.

Stam’s point of departure is a timely terminological observation: despite being common currency in contemporary scholarly literature, the triad of terms in his title (*World Literature, Transnational Cinema, and Global Media*), have become “baggy-monster concepts, signifying too much and too little” (Stam 2019, 1). Through thirty-three short chapters, Stam’s book delves into the intellectual history and disciplinary debates that each of these concepts have mobilized and tests the biases and potentials of their methods of interpretation while meandering around literature, music, cinema, and all kinds of digital media. Although the book ends by eluding any emphatic conclusion—observing, with ecumenical undertones, that excellent research work has been performed under the three categories, and that they must be understood as contingent, mutable, and historically-situated constructs and not as static, all-encompassing buzzwords—Stam openly expresses a preference for the concept of the *transnational*. This term, he argues, is the most flexible and productive for a number of reasons, including the “mutually transformational dynamism” implied by the prefix *trans-* (thus encompassing and transcending the na-

tional) and, above all, for its capacity to “embed” a series of theoretical turns such as the postcolonial, the cultural, the feminist, the queer, and the digital (233–234). As the last chapter explicitly makes clear, the book aims “to manifest and perform” a *trans-methodology* as expansive as possible (237). To do so, Stam’s line of arguments transgresses well-established national, disciplinary and historical borders—a gesture that often implies a critical revision of the traditional toolbox of (Western) film scholars.

First, in his survey of transnational film formations, Stam demonstrates how Global South case studies such as Nollywood are refractory to many analytical categories and interpretative frameworks of the discipline. Text hermeneutics and film genre, for instance, fall short to understand the unique modes of South-South transnational distribution, exhibition, and reception that define this film formation. Any serious approach to Nollywood, Stam concludes, “clearly calls for altered categories of analysis,” ones that go well beyond the usual tropes employed by Western (progressive) film scholars looking at African cinema—i.e. world-system and centre-periphery theories, race theory, political auteurism, anti-colonial critique and the like (Stam 2019, 172–175).

Second, in broader disciplinary terms, the book takes seriously Christian Metz’s claim that cinema is made of “five tracks” (a Russian doll-like conception in which the music track, the visual track, and the soundtrack would carry the memory and expressive tools of preceding arts, including music, visual arts, narrative and dramatic literature, theatrical performance, and so on) to argue that cinema is inherently *transartistic*. Therefore, Stam fiercely opposes any kind of disciplinary enclosure, encouraging film and media scholars to adopt an unprejudiced “flaneur-like cultural-studies style freedom to stroll through various disciplinary and artistic neighborhoods” (14). This leads, on the one hand, to the analysis of more or less explicit hybridizations between art disciplines: from film adaptations of novels (chapters eight and nine) to an excursus on Brazilian music in which Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Chico Buarque de Holanda intertwine with a dense mesh of references that brings together classic Greek literature,

Brazilian modernism, and Cinema Novo film aesthetics (Stam 2019, 122–127). On the other hand, by putting the transdisciplinary at the centre of his method, the book also raises wider questions with major analytical reverberations, inviting the reader to question well-established hierarchies in film imaginaries and discourses—for instance, the prevalence of major feature films as privileged case studies, something much more present in contemporary academic literature and film programs than many scholars and curators would like to admit. Stam opens a critical dialogue with different traditions (from indigenous media to feminist film studies) to illuminate how this kind of hierarchical valorizations have traditionally discriminated and expelled both “minor film forms” (from short films to activist and militant media) and “minoritized subjects” (in terms of race, gender, and class).

A third inflection of Stam’s trans-methodology problematizes linear, teleological representations of history. Evoking a number of theoretical contributions (Walter Benjamin’s *revolutionary nostalgia*, Antonio Negri’s *futur antérieur*, Wai Chee Dimock’s *deep time*, Bakhtin’s *chronotope*), the book calls to place in critical relation past and present. By looking through a transhistorical prism, for instance, Stam demonstrates that an often-forgotten movement in traditional academic literature such as the Brazilian modernism headed by Oswald de Andrade can provide valuable critical tools to tackle some of the most urgent political challenges of our time, including indigenous anti-colonialism, the contestation of Eurocentric and teleological representations of history, anti-patriarchal critique, and anti-productivist and ecologist stances that anticipate Baudrillard, Marcuse, and Anthropocene theory (Stam 2019, 26–27).

The political backbone of Stam’s book is the idea of the Commons, probably one of the most influential and inspiring concepts in radical political theory and practice nowadays. Interestingly, the very notion of commons is itself transnational, since it links disparate sites of conflict around the world, from Chiapas to Standing Rock or the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes. It is transdisciplinary since it convokes different traditions of thought and struggle, from indigenous resistance to post-Fordist labor struggles, political ecology or materialist

feminism and it is transhistorical, since some of its most lucid contributors, notably Peter Linebaugh and Silvia Federici, have built their political theory by critically looking back to pre-capitalist struggles and problematizing dominant historical narratives. Stam's invitation to rethink film and media studies in the light of a "transartistic commons" is probably one of the most important contributions of the book, even if an adequate development of such an ambitious intellectual-political project logically falls outside the scope of a single-authored, purposefully generalist book such as this one.

Far from claiming a *tabula rasa* in the discipline, Stam proudly brings into focus a tradition of engaged, inclusive, and politically committed film studies. In a succinct history of the emergence of cinema studies departments in North American universities in the 1960s, Stam reminds that the discipline "began as a dissident, avant-garde friendly discipline...in tandem with other 'breakaway' transdisciplines such as Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies, and Third World Studies" (2019, 59). His proposal to think in terms of "transartistic commons" nowadays is thus an attempt to update and prolong this radical tradition of thought and pedagogy. In fact, by linking this project with explicit references to the 2007 financial crisis, the climate emergency, and the rise of Trump and other forms of national populisms, some passages of the book echo the political ethos and methodological audacity of British cultural studies in the early years of Thatcherism.

Although one might easily support Stam's call for a critical, transnational, politically engaged conception of film and media studies, the book surprisingly refrains from exploring how the historical and material conditions of "actually existing" academic institutions are at odds with such a project. This is particularly striking when Stam's book, albeit with an introductory and wide-angle point of view, manages to cover a comprehensive field of analysis, while demonstrating a remarkable ability to multiply the critical nuances of its own line of arguments. For instance, drawing on authors such as Ramon Lobato, Shekhar A. Deshpande and Meta Mazaj or Bhaskar Sarkar, Stam traces important theoretical reflections on cultural piracy.¹ In fact, the book celebrates remix, appropriation, mashup,

and all kinds of unruly cultural practices, rightly suggesting that piracy should be considered one of the most important driving forces in art and intellectual history and not a criminal activity punished by law. This observation, of course, is particularly pertinent in a volume that aims to open a dialogue with the Commons, a concept largely built upon the critique of one of the foundational movements of capitalism: the privatization (enclosure) of what used to be common goods and resources. And yet, the reader will not find any reference to one of the most blatant examples of contemporary enclosure in the academic world: the publishing giants that benefit from and privatize scholarly knowledge with the tacit or explicit connivance of most public and private universities—an intellectual and political battle that, far from being a merely symbolic or theoretical one, entails unacceptable forms of repression against the "pirates", as the fate of digital rights activist Aaron Schwartz sadly reminds us.

In a similar vein, Stam is correct when he incorporates to the discussion the critical exam of the institutions and uneven structures of power that define and shape the circulation of cinema and other media across nations nowadays. The book, for instance, acknowledges important developments in the field of festival studies, such as the analysis of the almost neo-colonial mediation that major film festivals establish between Global South filmmakers and Western audiences, either literally (through North-South programs of cooperation and "World Cinema" funds) or implicitly (by reifying aesthetic criteria and expectations on what a legitimate "festival film" should look like). Similarly, Stam's discourse is perfectly aware of the pernicious effects that film and media operations of global corporations have in the environment and local labour conditions, as analyzed in groundbreaking contributions such as the *Global Hollywood* edited collections (Govil, Miller, and McMurria 2001; Miller, Govil, and Wang 2005) or in the emerging field of "critical studies of media infrastructures." Unfortunately, Stam does not use his sharp critical apparatus to address what could have been a productive institutional critique of similar patterns in contemporary academia. Examples could range from the standardization of knowledge production (with scientometric transnational Anglo-Amer-

ican corporations such as Clarivate acting as rating agencies across the globe, with particularly dramatic effects over public university systems already torn by austerity policies, for instance in Southern Europe) to the corporation-like global expansion of major North American universities (with overseas campuses redrawing a new atlas of academic relations of power), not to mention the devaluation of the job market and the emergence of a rootless global academic precariat. In this regard, to a certain extent, the book fails to fulfill something that authors such as Masha Salazkina (2016) crucially observed: that any serious attempt to develop sustainable transnational syllabi, research curricula, and translation-based collaborative projects must necessarily address how contemporary academic institutions and precarious labour conditions are putting at risk the very conditions of possibility of such a promising critical project.

Notes

1. It is necessary to note, in passing, that Lobato is wrongly identified as “Labato,” while Deshpande is wrongly identified as “Seshpande” (Stam 2019, 187). Misspellings of non-English names and film titles are constant throughout the book, a most striking circumstance in a work devoted to transnational studies. To mention just some examples, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea’s Cuban film *La última cena* is referred to as *La Ultimate Cena* (94), Mexican filmmaker Alejandro González Iñárritu is alternatively mentioned as “Ignarritu” (109) or “Gonzales Iñárritu” (171), while Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar is invariably misnamed “Almadovar” (94, 126, 128, 153). These editorial flaws, together with recurrent typos and almost literal repetitions of entire sentences in some passages, hinder the reading experience of the book, otherwise written in a quite enjoyable style.

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