IN FOCUS: Non-W estern Historiography?

A Polemic

Introduction

by AHMET GÜRATA AND LOUISE SPENCE

History, as we know it, is full of uncertainties, insuffi ciencies, unsatisfying or partially obstructed views of the world. Scholars stretch to recover blank spaces. We strain to fi ll the gaps, to explain the connections. We leap into ruptures in hopes of fi nding new approaches, details, anecdotes, and patterns of recurrence that will make our descriptions fuller, more vivid, less defi cient. And we form histories that describe the world based on the knowledge we have acquired. But, of course, our knowledge of the world is never merely descriptive. Description is never ideologically or cognitively neutral. When we describe, we classify, we generalize, we impose hierarchal values. As Aijaz Ahmad and others have pointed out, to "describe" is to specify, to contain, and to produce knowledge that is "bound by that act of descriptive construction." When we describe, we "specify a locus of meaning."[1] Media history is no different.

John Patrick Leary argues in a recent *Social Text* article that to understand the history of Venezuela's Catia TVe would necessitate a history of Caracas's neighborhoods (many of them unmarked on maps, many of them illegal squatters' settlements on public or private land), and their transformations since the 1950s oil boom.[2] Leary stretches. He increases the variables relevant for thinking about Venezuelan television, and in doing so he moves the locus of meaning from television itself and the domestic as its site, to the transgressions intrinsic to barrio expansion and to attempts to build and fortify communities. And he introduces an urban imaginary that may have no correspondence in Western European or North American cities.

1   Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (Autumn 1987): 6.

2   John Patrick Leary, "TV Urgente: Urban Exclusion, Civil Society, and the Politics of Television in Venezuela," *Social Text* 99, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 25–53.

Brian Larkin, studying the Muslim Hausa city of Kano in northern Nigeria, writes about the 1944 introduction of radio in colonial Kano, and how the public loudspeakers' rediffusion of the BBC broadcasts "embodied leisure time." In a culture where the rhythms of agricultural work and religious practice were the prime demarcators of time, "the colonially imposed division between work and nonwork as organizing principles of the day was new and yet to be internalized."[3] By dividing the radio transmission into foreign- language service during work hours, and local vernacular service "when the workday (as defined by the Europeans) was finished," the British "materialized leisure time in sound waves . . . creating a new experiential rhythm to the day," even when the transmissions were unintelligible to a large number of the listeners who were unfamiliar with English and some of the vernacular languages. Their very unintelligibility carried a promise of the colonial ideal of progress "by suggesting that while the signal is incoherent now, the future of the individual and society as a whole is comprehension."[4] Noise communicates. Critically engaging with and questioning Western assumptions about commercial goods and modernity, Larkin provides a different genealogy for the emergence of radio in Kano. His history of northern Nigerian media employs analytical criteria that are socially specific to suggest the epistemic uncertainty produced by new technologies and how the intentions of the British (to construct an ideal colonial subject that was progressive, mutable, and politically quiescent), the technical capacity of radio, and its social and religious context were linked and governed not by commodity relations but by the political relations of national development.[5]

These examples provoke many questions: Are the social and theoretical presuppositions implicit in the analytical tools and operations of mainstream Euro-American film/TV/radio history appropriate or relevant to all contexts? Is the way we have been writing film and media histories based on certain generally "accepted" resources, framing devices, and parameters of understanding? Are these resources, framing devices, and parameters based on the Euro-American context, and Euro-American considerations and constraints? And are these resources, framing devices, and parameters really indispensable, borrowing from Hayden White, to the process of translating knowing into telling?[6] Perhaps different forms of understanding, different structures of time, and different notions of "place" and "community" define non-Western media histories.

What constitutes a legitimate object of analysis? Can we, for example, separate film history from neighborhood developments, from national development, from the implementation and penetration of television, or even cyberculture in some locales? What local circumstances might influence a history's narrative? This might include such concrete factors as cultural imperialism or subjugation to global market forces,

3   Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 52.

4   Ibid., 53.

5   Ibid., 59, 78, 126.

6 Hayden White, *The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Form* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1.

132

certainly, but also the industrialization of electricity, the availability of equipment and fi lm stock, the existence of fi lm schools, of archives, the level of commercialism of local industries, local defi nitions of the "authentic," local defi nitions of "modernity," curfews during certain eras, religious prohibitions against certain representations, or social prohibitions against public assembly. If we unquestioningly accept the Euro- American historical models, do we risk overlooking the ways other people and cultures have created their own analytical tools and conceptual categories?

If we examine only institutions and practices that are characteristic of Western cinema and media history while taking no notice of those institutions and practices that may be important in the local context but do not have parallels in Western experience (or if we simply disregard such institutions and practices as anomalies), we lose the unique circumstances of other contexts and experiences. Do epistemic and sensual perceptions, for instance, cross borders without change? What about Western criteria of periodization? Or of genres? In Turkey, for example, in the 1970s, a type of movie marketed specifi cally to female spectators was known as "family fi lms" (*aile fi lmleri*) to differentiate them from the popular "sex fi lms" (*seks fi lmleri*), mildly salacious comedies with female nudity. "Family fi lms" were Manichean cross-c lass love stories that navigated modern and traditional values. The female lead was often a singer, and the movies could contain as many as six to ten musical performances.[7] Here, Western industrial defi nitions of "melodrama" or "musical" would lend little insight into the circumstances that allowed these texts to speak meaningfuly to 1970s Turkish audiences.

But if claims of Euro- American origins are rejected altogether, the nativist extreme, we run the risk of overlooking ways that local culture has been altered and sometimes transformed by Euro- American media and Euro- American culture. We must be careful, therefore, to avoid essentialist or purist understandings of "culture"— or "nation"—while looking at the ways a designated history negotiates and challenges Euro- American constructs. Resistance and creative adaptation, blending and cross- fertilization, have been the norm in most cases.

Writing history is not a neutral or innocent process. Cinema and media histories are sociological and ideological constructs that make certain aesthetic and cultural assumptions. Hayden White has elaborated the similarities between imaginary and factual narratives. It is common to think of the fi ction writer fabricating his or her stories, and the historian simply "fi nding" them in the world. But this "obscures the extent to which 'invention' also plays a part in the historian's operations."[8] Think for a moment of Larkin's descriptions of Kano's public listening stations as generating "the laws and personnel necessary to maintain them, the national languages to make them work, the ordering of time, and the regulation of space." All of this contributes to the idea that exposure to new technology is not simply a question of having access to ideas from elsewhere, but actually constitutes "a positive good in and of itself."[9]

7   Abisel Nilgün, *Türk Sinemasi Üzerine Yazilar* (Ankara: Imge Kitabevi, 1994), 69.

8   Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-C entury Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 6–7.

9   Larkin, *Signal and Noise,* 59.

133

While similarities may exist among fi lm and media industries that occupy analogous positions in the transnational capitalist system, we cannot (or should not) construct a typology that freezes or de- historicizes the events and situations of specifi c locales so that they become "epistemological impossibilities."[10] Is the separation between the public and the private that has marked Western capitalism, and characterized the Western urban intelligentsia, for instance, also a part of Latin American, African, Asian, or Middle Eastern social reality? Capitalism itself, even when it may dominate, cannot be universalized, as class formations as well as relations to the metropoles and circuits of exchange differ, both internationally and within particular areas. Nor can modernism be universalized. It, too, is experienced differently in different contexts.[11] Because we are dealing with technologies that are not outside modern systems of production, does it mean that we should read their histories solely within capitalist ideologies? Leary's discussion of the history of Catia TVe, for example, does not analyze it as capitalism's "Other." Rather, his discussion of Catia TVe involves notions of collectivity and community that are seldom part of Western historiography or even part of descriptions of Western leftist output, even though they have been current in much black and feminist fi lmmaking and theory within the postmodern US and UK for decades.

The examples of non-W estern histories that follow do not form a cogent narrative. Nor do they formulate a short course in non- Western historiography. But they do, we hope, illustrate the historical richness of considering cinema in local contexts without imposing the criteria and methods, the social and theoretical presuppositions, embedded in Euro- American historiography. We do not wish to imply that there is a single or hegemonic "non- Western" historiography. India and Mexico (despite the fact that both have experienced colonialism and imperialism, although in extremely different ways) do not have a common history. Nor do their media industries or the circulation of their products have much in common. And there are differing ideological infl ections to their views of the nation-s tate, "nationalism," and even "cultural production," as well as different psychic and political attitudes toward their own history.

We suggest demolishing, not reversing, binary hierarchies. Decentering Euro- American epistemologies does not mean replacing them with "correct" ones; it means destabilizing the idea of a single sense of authority, opening up our sense of history to multiple authorities, and valuing the subsequent instability of multifaceted,

10   Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness," 5.

11   This became clear in debates over the fi lm language of Japanese cinema from the mid- 1970s on. See, for example, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, "Space and Narration in the Films of Ozu," *Screen* 17, no. 1 (1976): 41–73; Kristin Thompson, "Notes on the Spatial System of Ozu's Early Films," *Wide Angle* 1, no. 4 (1977): 8–17; Paul Willemen, "Notes on Subjectivity," *Screen* 19, no. 1 (1978): 41–70; Noel Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in*

the Japanese Cinema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); David Bordwell, "Our Dream Cinema: Western Historiography and the Japanese Film," *Film Reader* 4 (1979–1980), 44–62; Peter Lehman, "The Mysterious Orient, the Crystal Clear Orient, the Non-E xistent Orient: Dilemmas of Western Scholars of Japanese Film," *Journal of Film and Video* 39, no. 1 (1987): 5–15; Chris Berry, "Our Problem Cinema: The Challenge of Japanese Cinema," *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture* 4, no. 1 (1990): 193–217; and Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, "The Diffi culty of Being Radical: The Discipline of Film Studies and the Postcolonial World Order," *Boundary 2*, 18, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 242–257. There are, of course, many other discussions of modernism and cinema, for instance, Miriam Bratu Hansen's work, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 59–77; and "Fallen Women, Rising Stars, New Horizons: Shanghai Silent Film as Vernacular Modernism," *Film Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2000): 10–22.

134

intertwining modes of analysis.[12] While the examples here, and the essays that follow, do not suggest a particular non-W estern historiography, they do suggest that it may be time to rethink and reevaluate how we commonly "do" fi lm and media history, and to encourage Euro-A merican historians to ask questions about their historiographic traditions which they have not heretofore asked. It may be possible to see that theories of history are themselves grounded in historical, ideological, and geographic contexts. ✳

12 Trinh T. Minh-h a discusses the "disorder inherent in every order." See "Documentary Is/Not a Name," *October* 52 (Summer 1990): 95.

om the North, how can we escape from such external otherness, especially when it's repeated every day in the big media? The multiplication of big media has not brought the Real conditions of existence of the multitudes in the South any closer, even if some of these realities—generally the most graphic and therefore conventionally newsworthy—are nowadays widely reported. But almost all this reportage continues to be produced by the major international broadcasters. Very little of it originates from the country under investigation. In the past, this often meant that even major upheavals in remote and inaccessible places around the globe would go underreported. Nowadays, the spread of digital communications means that when foreign correspondents are kept out, it is the locals, in places like Burma and Iran, who use their mobile phones to supply the world with news, photos, and videos of what is happening. But these are extreme situations and provide only a glimpse of what might result from the convergence of different media. Meanwhile, the dominant perspective on the otherness of the wider world remains external, and mostly emptied of local political context precisely because it is designated as the perspective of the outsider. And even if reporters are honest and ethical and conscientious, they're still constrained by the blinkered purview of the media industry's editorial gatekeepers. These people are not prone to critical refl ection, and the problem for those who are is exclusion from the wider public debate, the public sphere which has the paradoxical quality, as Judith Butler recently observed, of being "constituted in part by what cannot be said or what cannot be shown."