

Network Films: a Global Genre?

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This thesis is solely my original work, except where due reference is given.

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Abstract

Network Films: a Global Genre?

Over the past three decades there has been a boom in films which present collections of strangers whose lives coincidentally intersect, in ways unbeknownst to them but revealed to the audience. *Love Actually* (Curtis 2003), *Babel* (Iñárritu 2006), *Crash* (Haggis 2005), and *Magnolia* (Anderson 1999) are among the most internationally well known examples of such films. While a fair amount of academic attention has been paid to such films, very little work has investigated whether these types of films constitute a genre in distinction to ensemble films. Furthermore, while some cross cultural comparison has been made of such films, few have considered how the films and the concept of a global genre might relate to discursive terms such as “world cinema” and “art cinema”. Drawing on the genre theory of Rick Altman (1984, 1999) and Paul Willemen’s endorsement of comparative film studies (2005), I conduct a comparative genre study of seven network films: *Babel*, *Crash*, *The Edge of Heaven* (Akin 2007), *Love for Share* (Di Nata 2006), *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys* (Haneke 2000), *Lantana* (Lawrence 2001), and *Mumbai My Life* (Kamat 2008). I seek to identify whether these seven examples of network films, which show numerous similarities despite their international origins, share generic qualities. Simultaneously, I conduct analyses of their narrative politics in order to ultimately discuss how such a global group of films reframe notions of “world cinema” and “art cinema”.

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Introduction: Are Network Films a Global Genre?

In the summer of 2007 when I formulated the research proposal for this thesis I reflected on the most fascinating films I had seen over the years. They ranged from intriguing classics such as *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954) and *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941), to sprawling social panoramas such as *Nashville* (Altman 1975), Kieslowski's *Three Colours* trilogy (1993, 1994, 1994) and *Magnolia* (Anderson 1993), to contemporary complex narratives including *I Heart Huckabees* (Russell 2004), *Memento* (Nolan 2000), and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry 2004). I saw in these films a fascination with chance and fateful connections between characters that sought to remedy feelings of social and personal alienation. The sincerity of this theme was refreshing to me in light of having recently studied ideas of existentialism, pastiche and irony.¹ I was also interested in the fact that these narratives showed the complexity of relationships and interactions between people who live alongside one another as strangers, particularly in urban environments. These films, much like the labyrinthine stories of Jorge Luis Borges ([1962] 2000), exhibit provocative treatments of space, time, and character relationships. Primarily I was interested in exploring how such aspects worked narratologically and thematically in complex narratives and how such films compared with one another to signify a distinct social paradigm.

As the project proceeded, I narrowed my discussion to contemporary “network narratives” (Bordwell 2006, 97-102; 2008a 191); films such as *Crash* (Haggis 2004), *The Edge of Heaven* ([*Auf der anderen Seite*] Akin 2007) and *Babel* (Iñárritu 2006) which interweave multiple protagonists' lives into a network so that audiences can recognise their comparable personal situations and relationships even if the protagonists themselves do not notice these connections. Over the past three decades there has been a global boom in films such as these. *Love Actually* (Curtis 2003), *Valentine's Day* (Marshall 2010), *He's Just Not That Into You* (Kwapis 2009), *Babel*, *Crash*, and *Magnolia* are among the most internationally well known examples.

¹ In fact, some critics suggest such contemporary films belong to a movement of “New Sincerity” in counter to theories of postmodernism (Olsen 1999; Hancock 2005). There is much contention about whether the paradigm of network society has superseded that of postmodernism (Kirby 2006; Elsaesser 2009, 16; Everett 2005, 167; Mayshark 2007, 189; Sibielski 2004). It should be noted that a discussion of postmodernism in relation to network films is not a focus of this thesis, since my study primarily concerns genre and world cinema.

During my research I realised that in making narratological and thematic comparisons, I was investigating whether these films form a well-defined body of texts, in fact, a genre. In order to commit to a genre study and explore a handful of films in depth, I limited my case studies to seven films. Each is a clear example of a network narrative, with serious cultural content that provides rich material for analysis of textual politics. This thesis analyses *The Edge of Heaven*, hereafter abbreviated to *Edge*, a Turkish German film by the acclaimed director Fatih Akin. *Edge* appealed because of its realistic and deft depiction of tragedy and love in the interwoven transnational and international relationships of six characters. *Crash* proved interesting because of its multiracial social cross section of Los Angeles and its tightly crafted visual and thematic connections between characters. The Australian film *Lantana* (Lawrence 2001) follows marital and romantic relationships amongst inhabitants of Sydney, again in a realistic and sombre fashion, and its depiction of multicultural Australia is intriguing. Similarly, the Indonesian film *Love for Share* ([*Berbagi Suami*] Di Nata 2006) compares marital, romantic and social relationships and experiences of polygamy between three different female characters. *Love for Share*, hereafter shortened to *Love*, aroused my interest as a prime example of a non-Western film to compare with the Anglo and European texts, particularly since it deals directly with Islamic practices of polygamy, as well as with multicultural Indonesian society. The French German Romanian coproduction *Code Unknown: Incomplete Tales of Several Journeys* ([*Code inconnu: Récit incomplete de divers voyages*] Haneke 2000; hereafter *Code Unknown*) contrasts different experiences of life in France, with a strikingly realistic visual style typical of its director Michael Haneke. *Mumbai My Life* ([*Mumbai Meri Jaan*] Kamat 2008), a film from India, also addresses themes of class, social and religious differences between a handful of coincidentally linked characters. Hereafter abbreviated to *Mumbai*, this film provides an apt avenue of discussion for considering how Indian cinema compares and relates to other cinemas around the world. Finally, I could not go past *Babel*, one of the most ambitious examples of a network film, as it features connections between four different narrative threads set in Morocco, Japan, and Mexico. These seven international examples of network films provide a wealth of narrative and thematic material for analysis and comparison.

It struck me that very little attention or analysis has been paid to the question of whether network films constitute a genre. Addressing this gap, my thesis provides thorough narrative analyses of these fascinating films, and presents a study of whether

films such as these can be described as a genre. While there are many cases on the borderline between network and other types of narrative, these seven films illustrate core characteristics which recur in numerous network films. These core characteristics are drawn from a “common cultural consensus” about what constitutes network films (Tudor [1974] 2000, 96). This use of a “common cultural consensus” sidesteps the “empiricist dilemma” in genre studies as Andrew Tudor describes it. Tudor writes that, when defining genre,

we are caught in a circle which first requires that the films are isolated, for which purposes a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films.
(96)

Tudor proposes that to solve this circular approach to genre definition, we “lean on a common cultural consensus” (96), an approach that I have taken. These seven examples of network films thus provide a prime sample for generic analysis. Generic categorisation is a useful way of describing how films which are alike function textually, visually, ideologically, discursively, and economically. As Michael Kearns (2008) describes it,

Genre theory reflects one of the fundamental realities of human cognition and communication: we understand and refer to phenomena by comparing them to existing categories and if necessary by modifying the categories or creating new ones. (201)

My study is one of such attempts to understand and categorise a group of texts. It is likely that network films will remain within the broad “drama”, “romantic comedy” or “foreign film” sections of DVD and online stores. Nevertheless, I contend that to determine whether or not network films from around the world constitute a genre provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of international cinema relationships.

As I researched into these films, genre, and world cinema studies, I found a recurrent convincing line of argument to be that cross cultural genre comparisons of films tend to emphasise the national divisions between texts (Moine 2008, 192). While marvellous studies exist which compare international variants of genres (Langford 2005;

Cooke 2007b), the field of genre studies remains generally Hollywood-centric (Moine 2008, 194; Staiger 2008, viii; Grant 2007, 2; Langford 2005, x). In my view necessitating a non-Hollywood-centric approach to analysing them, network films have appeared relatively simultaneously around the world, with arguably no singular national origin. Although a large number of network films were produced in America during the mid to late 1990s, many others were produced elsewhere concurrently and preceding this proliferation. I thereby propose that we think of these films as a global collection. In sum I chose seven films from different countries to test whether network films comprise what I wish to describe as a “global genre”. This is a term I explain more fully in Chapter One, but briefly, here denotes a contrast to the perception that genres are nationally divisive. This selection of seven films does not represent cinema from every country in the world. Nevertheless, it provides an extensive range through which to consider these issues of genre theory and perceptions of world cinema.

Simultaneously, my choice of “serious” films further binds together an otherwise broad international selection. Many questions involving categorical notions of “world cinema” and “art cinema” arise when considering this cross cultural selection of films. As well as confining this thesis’ scope to the manageable limit of seven clear examples of network films, the selection consists of films commonly labelled “art” films. All of the seven films were screened in film festivals and are thereby popularly labelled “art cinema” (Wong 2011, 6) in contrast to “mainstream” examples of network films such as *Love Actually* and *He’s Just Not That Into You*. This selection raises questions of whether the labels “art cinema” and “mainstream” are in fact useful. Beyond the question of whether network films can be identified as a genre, the latter part of this thesis explores how the case studies relate to terms such as “art cinema”, “mainstream cinema”, and “world cinema”.

This comparative study thereby contributes to a current focus in cinema scholarship regarding network films, genre theory, and world cinema. It refines the classification of a film format which has been globally widespread throughout the last three decades. It presents a thorough cross-cultural analysis of seven films in response to the relative scarcity of such comparative study. It expands the notion of genre, nudging it out of Hollywood-centric and nationally determinate biases, perceiving it to be a conversation between multiple countries. It questions the limitations and value of the theoretical and popularly used terms “world cinema” and “art cinema”. And it charts

the power structures of and between the seven different films, primarily in terms of their modes of representation and later in regard to their respective industries. I analyse these aspects in eight chapters, outlined below.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One: Situating Network Films

In Chapter One I review the extant literature surrounding network films, situating them in the cultural context of “network society” (Castells 2000a, 1). Network films, which commonly portray strangers whose lives coincidentally interlink and affect one another’s, draw on the cultural paradigm of “network society” as described by Manuel Castells (2000a, 1-4). The idea of “six degrees of separation” is emblematic of this paradigm, describing the ways in which people’s lives around the globe are now interlinked, thanks to mutual acquaintances and information technologies. It is my contention that network films respond to this social context by dwelling on the theme of whether characters are entwined in a “network community”, a term explained in Chapter Two.

Chapter One justifies my proposed definition of network films as distinctive to those of others. Two notable lengthy studies have been published on network films: David Bordwell’s chapter “Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance” in his 2008 book *Poetics of Cinema*, which does not label these films a genre; and María del Mar Azcona’s 2010 book *The Multi-Protagonist Film* which describes network films as a genre but includes films in which none of the characters are strangers to one another. In contrast to Bordwell’s study this thesis concentrates on whether network films can be labelled a genre. And in contrast to Azcona I argue that the fact network films connect the lives of strangers is a crucial element that distinguishes them from ensemble films.

Chapter One also details the genre theory which this thesis uses to analyse the films. I draw on the seminal theory of Rick Altman (1984, 1999), in particular his idea that genres are best defined using the notion of the interplay between semantics and syntax. As Altman defines it, semantics are the generic “building blocks” such as costumes, settings, music, props and character types (1999, 219). Syntactic elements are “the structures into which they [the semantics] are arranged”, such as the plot structures,

visual styles, and narratological patterns (219). Throughout Chapters Two, Three, Four, Five, Six and Seven I analyse the extents to which the case studies share semantic and syntactic tropes in order to ascertain whether network films might comprise a genre.

In addition to outlining the relevant literature surrounding network films and the genre theory which informs the majority of the thesis, Chapter One provides the theoretical background concerning notions of “world cinema” and “art cinema” that Chapters Seven and Eight explore further. Chapter One flags these relevant theories to forewarn the reader of the direction this thesis takes and to make clear from the outset how and why these issues are integral to the study of the seven network films. Ahead of this discussion, Chapters Two through to Seven focus on whether the seven films constitute a genre.

Chapter Two: Common Topics

Chapter Two serves as a general introduction to the seven case studies and their key issues and themes which will be addressed in detail throughout the thesis. In order to investigate whether or not network films constitute a genre, this chapter examines whether network films have semantic and syntactic consistencies in their representations of common topics and themes. Altman writes that “common topics” can be a generic semantic marker (1999, 89). Additionally, I contend that in genre studies, common themes can be considered syntactic markers.

Chapter Two provides synopses of the seven films and assesses whether they have common topics and themes. Of note, the seven films each feature a social cross section that cuts across class, cultural, gender, age and other differences. Many of them deal with cultural conflicts, violence, and depict chance encounters which highlight the complexity of urban and contemporary life. These qualities are typically arranged to draw connections between characters which in turn thematically raise questions about and reframe notions of community. In this chapter I explain my formulation of the term “network community” to describe such a theme. The term “network community” draws on the theory of “network sociality” that Andreas Wittel (2001, 51) uses to describe new types of casual and temporary relationships that global travel and communication have fostered. Yet network films frequently question whether characters also share cosmopolitan experiences and bonds based on aspects usually considered communal

(Tönnies [1887] 2001, 19). I thus arrive at the term “network community” to describe this theme, and use this term throughout the thesis.

Towards the end of this chapter I also draw attention to the fact that the films, in showing multiple characters, aim to present pluralistic narratives. However, as the subsequent chapters discuss, the ways in which the seven films manage pluralism differs according to their narrative politics. I therefore here make a concise equation to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony (1973, 4), which scholar John Bruns has also applied to network films in his 2008 article “The Polyphonic Film”. I continue an exploration of narrative polyphony throughout my analyses.

Chapter Three: Character Types

Chapter Three compares the seven films’ representations of characters, simultaneously delving further into their narrative politics. Altman describes character types as a semantic factor of genre films (1999, 53; see also Grant 2007, 17). In this chapter I ask whether the seven films share specific character types, observing primary recurring figures of cultural others, men in crisis, and “strong” women.

This chapter also examines the extent to which the films create pluralistic, polyphonic narratives. Looking at the characterisation and narrative trajectories it appears that the politics of representation in the seven films are often problematic. Some of them practise modes of stereotyping, feature biases around certain characters and actors that lead to the centralising of these characters while relegating others to the peripheries, and reinstate narrative hierarchies which undermine central themes of complexity and plurality. These narrative politics create distinctions between the films and bring a degree of contestation to the question of whether the films use character types generically.

Ultimately, the extent to which cultural others, men in crisis, and “strong” women can be labelled character types is questionable since these are very broad categories not exclusive to network films. However, just as genres such as musicals are not necessarily defined by aspects such as settings or plots, the non-exclusivity of these possible character types in network films highlights the fact that semantics and syntax must work together to constitute a genre (Altman 1999 220).

Chapter Four: Semantics and Syntax of Character Parallels

This fourth chapter develops Chapter Three's exploration into whether the films treat characters in generic ways. It investigates whether the use of narrative and stylistic devices which connect network characters and the resulting theme of network community are semantic and syntactic elements. Altman describes "shared plots, key scenes...familiar objects or recognizable shots and sounds" as semantic elements, while he claims that the ways "a group of texts organizes those building blocks in a similar manner" constitutes syntactic arrangements (1999, 89). The ways in which characters connect in order to convey the themes at hand through networked relationships suggest syntax at work, in conjunction with the possibly semantic character types discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter additionally explores stylistic devices that help to convey such connections between characters, including editing, *mise-en-scène*, and music. Following on from the analysis of textual politics in Chapter Three, this chapter attends to how these narrative patterns and audiovisual stylistics shape representational politics and power structures, and the extent to which they express or undermine the notion of pluralism. This chapter's examination of whether stylistic motifs exist amongst the seven case studies contributes a specifically audiovisual dimension to the investigation of whether or not these films might constitute a genre.

Chapter Five: Plots and Time

Altman's observation that genre films use comparable plots (1999, 89) is the key focus of Chapter Five. This chapter explores whether the seven case studies present similar plots, and analyses how their use of simultaneity influences their narrative politics. The seven case studies do not all share the same plots or temporal arrangements. Some are jumbled, some are clearly linear, others are linear but are unspecific about their timelines, some are cyclical, and some are triptychs. Yet one crucial aspect of network films' plot structures which deserves scrutiny because of its distinctiveness is the way in which the films emphasise the simultaneity of narrative threads in order to relate and shape their characters' experiences into a coherent narrative. The ways in which their plots are arranged and the character threads are managed collectively bears key testament to the importance of the theme of network community. Furthermore, the temporal divisions, ruptures, coincidences, convergences,

parallels and manipulations in the narratives, as well as elements such as how much screen time certain characters are given and how the film is paced are intrinsic ingredients of how the films present network society in various degrees of complexity and polyphony.

Another key influence on my interpretation of the representation of time and polyphony in the seven case studies is Allan Cameron's (2008) discussion of the representation of time in "modular narratives" (a category to which only particular network films belong [15]). Of special relevance is Cameron's idea of a/synchrony, which can denote either the rupturing of time in a film's structure whilst its diegesis remains coherent, or vice versa (146). It is useful to ask whether, in drawing attention to contingency and convergences, these network films might use aspects such as a/synchrony and the depiction of time in comparable, generic ways. Throughout this chapter I thus concentrate on how temporal a/synchrony, disjunctures and polyphony are expressed in the seven case studies. I examine whether the films use these elements in generic ways.

Chapter Six: Mapping Space

In Chapter Six I investigate whether the seven films' spatial settings may be considered generic aspects in keeping with Altman's recognition that settings often help viewers to identify particular genres (1984, 10-11). A distinctive element of network films is that they are mostly set in cities, frequently famous "global" or "world" cities (Sassen 2002, 100). Cities are apt spaces for network films to visualise their themes of connection and the concept of community. This comes in counter to the complaint that cities incite alienation. Network films frequently use cities to illustrate multicultural intersections and milieux, as the public arenas which allow characters to cross paths and have brief encounters and fleeting relationships. Through these encounters and the characters' other types of connections, these spaces help to convey themes of network community. This chapter analyses how the films depict different types of spaces. It discusses whether they convey local or touristic points of view; notes how characters' uses of space frequently blurs the dividing line between public and private; compares how some of the films create international spatial connections; analyses the types of spaces in which characters' encounters occur; and considers whether the films' moments of closure are comparable. The use of space and place in network films is

evaluated in terms of whether they share generic semantic markers and syntactic relationships, and how the use of space affects the individual films' narrative politics and representations of pluralism.

Chapter Seven: Production Backgrounds and Distribution

This chapter explores whether the films are being produced in acknowledgement of each other and studies the films' production backgrounds and methods of distribution in order to ascertain whether network films are being marketed as a genre. For a long time genre categories were defined by their production backgrounds (Altman 1999, 122). Genre is often understood to indicate certain industries or *auteurs* who repeatedly produce similar types of films. Altman describes this attitude as “genre as *blueprint*, as a formula that precedes, programmes and patterns industry production” (14). I analyse published interviews related to the seven case studies in order to ascertain whether their creators are making these films in view of a generic formula. I also examine whether promotional materials advertise network films as a genre.

Chapter Seven's final section briefly compares how the films were produced and distributed around the world. It investigates the economic inequalities between the films' production costs and their geographic ranges of distribution. These differences help to highlight and describe the relationships between film industries around the world. This chapter looks at how the seven films were received in academic work and in popular English-language online platforms. I draw attention to the confusion surrounding identifying terms such as “art cinema”, “mainstream” and “national cinema/s”. This insight into the seven case studies' production backgrounds, categories of identification, and the controversies surrounding terms such as “art cinema” and “world cinema” pre-empt the next chapter's discussion of how these films relate to notions of world cinema.

Chapter Eight: Network Films and World Cinema

In Chapter Eight I discuss the concept of “world cinema” in relation to the seven case studies' narrative themes, textual elements, styles and modes of address. As noted, I partly chose the seven films to analyse because they have all commonly been labelled “art films” and they represent different cinemas commonly regarded as “national

cinema/s” or “world cinema”. Here I investigate the nature, legitimacy and value of the terms “national cinema” and “world cinema”, and discuss the association of the label “art cinema” in relation to the seven network films.

Chapter Eight outlines general characteristics attributed to “national” and “art” cinemas. It discusses how these characteristics are changing in view of globalisation and in regard to debates around the power relationships between such cinemas and the notion of “world cinema”. The effects of globalisation have long been destabilising the concepts of distinct national cinemas and the relationships between them and American cinema (see Stone 2007; Cooke 2007b; Elsaesser 2005, 485). I analyse how as individual films and as representatives of a global collection the seven case studies relate to interpretations of national, art, and world cinema. I ask whether or not these traits are typical of the industries and traditions from which the particular films come. I finally discuss how the answers to this question may contribute to a reframing of notions of industrially and nationally differentiated cinemas.

And Now for the Main Feature

Overall this study contributes to the longstanding fields of film genre studies and the recently changing approaches to comparative film studies and world cinema. Its theoretical implications are that: Altman’s theory of genre has continued applicability to recently-emerged genres; a concept of “network community” is useful to describe a key theme of network films and may be applied not only to network films but to other texts and discourses of connectivity; the definition of network films that Bordwell and Azcona’s significant studies offer require refinement; network films, unlike many other genres, represent a global genre that has arisen simultaneously around the world without one definitive originating country; accordingly the concept of world cinema needs to be reframed with a more fluid understanding of national and industry borders; a comparative approach yields a wealth of critique and the ability to appropriately analyse a global genre. In short, this study presents the field of genre studies with an additional genre, one which supports recent scholarship indicating that world cinema needs to be regarded as an interrelated whole rather than easily differentiated national cinemas.

As stated earlier, this is not an exhaustive study of network films. Instead, this study presents a specific and in-depth analysis of the extra/textual workings of a handful

of closely related network films. As noted above, the amount may be criticised as too few to warrant any conclusion as to whether the films belong to a genre. Yet as Chapter One explains, some scholars have provided studies either directly or to the effect of labelling them a genre. In consideration of this literature's gaps I present a distinct definition of network films and take the opportunity to address important questions regarding the categorisation of cinema in film scholarship. I consider the importance of network films as a global group of films which have been created within close temporal proximity and with clear narratological overlap. This is perhaps not surprising given the contemporary global flows of cinema. Yet as a global group, and potentially a global genre, these films are remarkable because they exemplify and enact an important bridging of boundaries which have often limited the theories and concepts used in film studies. My concluding remarks highlight the significance of network films for genre and world cinema studies, and offer further avenues for investigation into this remarkable global collection of films. Ultimately the concept of a global genre crucially reframes notions of categorisation in film studies.