



# The Asian-African Film Connection: Cross-Cultural Imaginaries, Shared Sources, Parallel Histories

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## ABSTRACT

This Dossier is inspired by two urgent needs in Film and Screen Studies, particularly within the UK context, but also globally – the need to transform the content of what we research and teach, and the need to transform the methodologies through which we research and teach. The articles presented here emerged out of “The Asian-African Film Connection” workshop held at SOAS University of London in July 2018 – an event specifically designed to bring UK-based African and Asian film scholars into conversation with one another, to explore cinematic sources, themes and aesthetics that both link and divide these two regions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Within all academic disciplines, a vast percentage of scholarly works and popular debate still oscillates exclusively around an Anglo-American, European framework, while parading as universal. This situation of geographical bias in Higher Education globally – a legacy of Western imperialism and colonialism – is one of the reasons why renewed decolonisation movements began at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, in 2015, and have spread throughout the world, inspiring a vast range of activist and academic projects (see, for example, Mignolo and Walsh 2018, Mirza 2018, Bhambra et al 2018, Ray 2018). Some may critique “decolonisation” for becoming a “buzzword”, and not without justification (Khan 2021), but the fact that it has been taken up by contemporary academics in such a diverse range of locations and disciplines suggests that, through this concept, many of us in higher education institutions have recognised a significant problem that needs to be addressed in myriad ways.

Indeed, this Dossier is partly inspired by our belief in the need to explore what decolonisation means in relation to the discipline of Film and Screen Studies, particularly within the UK context where we are based, but also globally, through broadening the content of what we research and teach beyond EuroAmerica, and through transforming the methodologies through which we research and teach to make them more collaborative. It does not take any definition of “decolonisation” for granted, however; rather, it suggests that conversations around decolonisation can become far more nuanced if we try to adopt a global perspective, decentering EuroAmerica within these debates and paying greater attention to interactions between the regions that those of us in this Dossier study in relation to film – Africa and Asia.

The Dossier has emerged out of a very modest pilot project which nevertheless helped to inform a much larger, five-year project (2019–2024) funded by the European Research Council called “African Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies,” hosted at SOAS University of London and for which we are respectively the Principal Investigator (Dovey) and Senior Researcher (Taylor-Jones) (see [www.screenworlds.org](http://www.screenworlds.org)). We explain more about this larger project towards the end of this introduction and discuss how what we learned from working on this particular Dossier has informed the “Global Screen Worlds” strand of the “African Screen Worlds” project. The four, co-authored articles presented here emerged out of a one-day workshop held at SOAS in July 2018, called “The Asian-African Film Connection” – an event specifically designed to bring UK-based scholars of Asian and African film into conversation with one another, to explore cinematic sources, themes and aesthetics that both link and divide these two regions, against a backdrop of our broader marginalisation within mainstream Film and

Screen Studies. The choice to focus on UK-based scholars was due to financial constraints as we were working on a shoestring budget at this time, and we should note that there were other UK-based scholars who work on Asian and African cinemas that we would have loved to invite but simply could not afford at that moment to welcome into the project. We would also like to note that we are delighted that, after the workshop, Deanna T. Nardy – who is based in the United States – agreed to work with Jennifer and Jamie Coates on their triply co-authored article.

The workshop was motivated by our sense that one way that the content of the Film and Screen Studies curriculum in the UK and globally can become more representative and accurate is through the inclusion of deep, grounded knowledge of specific African and Asian (and other non-EuroAmerican) cinemas, and through research into their interaction. All eleven of us included in this Dossier come to the study of cinema through a particular regional specialism, and we as co-editors came together initially because of our respective investment in the need for a “cultural turn” in Film and Screen Studies that values regional, cultural and linguistic knowledge as much as it values a deep knowledge of global film history and theory. The bias towards Asia and Africa here emerges out of our own regional specialisms (Dovey – Africa; Taylor-Jones – Asia) and is not intended to be exclusive or marginalising of other regions beyond EuroAmerica; indeed, in the larger “Global Screen Worlds” project that has emerged out of this modest experiment, and which we explain later, diverse cinematic contexts from around the world are represented, from indigenous filmmaking communities in South America, to explorations of how a love of Korean drama connects viewers in Madagascar and north-east India.

While English-language studies on Asian and African cinemas have been steadily growing in the past two decades, few works have placed these cinemas into dialogue with one another (see, however, Jedlowski and Rösenthaller [2017, 2019], Jedlowski [2018], Magnan-Park [2018], Centeno-Martin [2020], and Bao [2020] as examples of pioneering scholars who have been attempting this). Although we were very aware of the workshop’s location in the former imperial metropolis of London, we felt that “The Asian-African Film Connection” was still helpful for those of us in the UK to pay attention to the phenomena of historical and contemporary cinematic interactions between different Asian and African contexts, as well as discrete yet similar cinematic experiences across these areas. Geographically we have defined these vast regions as inclusively as possible – with Africa as extending from South Africa (Singer) to Ethiopia (Thomas) to the Maghreb (Van de Peer), and with Asia ranging from East Asia (Berry, Coates, Coates, Denison, Nardy) all the way to Iran (Han). We unfortunately did not have the scope in the workshop or this dossier to include South or South-East Asia, or to consider diasporic communities from Africa and Asia living in different parts

of the world, but these regions are vital to “Global Screen Worlds.”

Drawing on participants’ regional knowledge, we were keen to visualise Africa and Asia not as essentialist categories, but rather ‘as a contextualized position’ (Wang 2007: 321). In order to do justice to such a contextualised position, we sought to challenge the homogeneity sometimes encouraged through a world cinema approach. Partly driven by parallel research on world literature (Casanova 2004, Moretti 2000), world cinema scholarship has made a vital and important contribution to broadening the cinematic canon of Film and Screen Studies, one that we do not intend to deny (see, for example, Hill and Gibson 2000, Gamm 2004, Chaudhuri 2005, Badley and Palmer 2006, Dennison and Lim 2006, Grant and Kuhn 2006, Durovicova and Newman 2009, Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2012, White 2015). However, as many world cinema scholars themselves have acknowledged, “world cinema” has failed to rid itself of the bias integral to its name, which can imply a simplistic binary between “the West” and “the rest” and which, at worst, can become a commercial label (see Nagib, Perriam and Dudrah 2012 for a critique of this). Far from shunning the thorny question of what constitutes “world cinema”, Dennison and Lim acknowledge that the concept is “a theoretical problem” (2006: 1) because of the way it can homogenise markedly diverse, distinct forms of non-western filmmaking under one umbrella term, derivative of perspectives firmly based within EuroAmerica. Indeed, postcolonial critics such as Graham Huggan (2001) have gone so far as to call such “world” products the “postcolonial exotic”, a canny way of marketing the world’s margins for consumption largely within EuroAmerica, and this helps to explain why the category of “world cinema” is particularly dominant within international film festivals and as part of university film programme offerings, where lone curators or lecturers are expected to become experts on the entirety of the non-EuroAmerican world’s cinematic cultures.

The limitations of the category of “world cinema” thus raise the question: how is it possible for any single scholar, curator or lecturer to chart the contours of cinema produced and circulated across the entire world without reducing the diversity of that world to simply what that scholar, curator or lecturer is able to understand from their own context and knowledge base? This results in scholars potentially overlooking important cultural nuances in local film traditions, deafness to linguistic nuances in film languages the scholar does not know, and even egregious mistakes (see, for example, where Ezra and Rowden confuse the countries of Ethiopia and Djibouti [2006: 7]). The response to the problem of the lone ranger “world cinema” scholar is evident in the large proportion of *edited* collections on this topic (for example, Hill and Gibson 2000, Dennison and Lim 2006, Grant and Kuhn 2006, Durovicova and Newman 2009, Nagib,

Perriam and Dudrah 2012). However, even these multi-authored projects cannot fully address the problem at the heart of “world cinema”, since each individual chapter tends to be singly authored and to move from one context to the next without elaborating a *comparative* analysis of these particular contexts in a sustained way – the kind of comparative film studies that Paul Willems called for more than a decade ago (2005) but to which no scholar has responded, probably due to the significant energy and resources required to realise such a project. We thus feel that far more conversation, discussion, and co-authorship amongst scholars with deep, regional expertise is necessary to render Film and Screen Studies more representative, accurate, and inclusive – principles that we have attempted to experiment with, however modestly, in this Dossier, and that we are trying to elaborate on in the larger “Global Screen Worlds” project.

One of the ways we can encourage this understanding is by humbly acknowledging where we do *not* have the necessary regional expertise and by pairing up with other scholars who do, and this is a vital methodological intervention that “The Asian-African Film Connection” workshop attempted to make. Rather than ask participants to come to the workshop with a ready-formed paper or idea to present, the workshop encouraged collaborative brainstorming, drawing on our respective knowledges, and it is through this conversational, collaborative, organic methodology that the ideas for the four articles presented here emerged. As workshop organisers and editors, we did not want to dictate to participants what they should write about, but rather wanted them to discover points of confluence and contradiction that interested or seemed significant to them based on their knowledge. The process of developing a *critical* approach to world cinema studies is necessarily difficult and uneven, since it is intended to disrupt the ease of a lone scholar sitting in a London office handpicking films from Cannes or Berlin to analyse simply because they appeal on a personal level. It is far more difficult to have to reckon with how to analyse films from contexts far removed from our own if we are confronted with a conversation with another scholar who exposes our relative lack of understanding of the cultures out of which those films have emerged. However, because of the difficulty of researching cinemas from diverse parts of the globe, it feels even more thrilling and exciting when points of convergence become clear. At the workshop we found that the conversations elucidated an incredible mixture of themes, visuals, approaches and affective responses to films and their productions that we would not have evoked had we gone through the conventional conference motions of delivering pre-written, 20-minute papers.

There are two further issues that we have found in “world cinema” approaches that we attempt to address here. First, the continent of Africa is almost entirely absent from the literature, undermining its objective of expanding the canon (for example, Chaudhuri’s 2005

book on “world cinema” omits Africa altogether; Bâ and Higbee’s vital 2012 book *De-Westernizing Film Studies* focuses far more on Black diaspora filmmakers and not as much on continent-based African filmmakers; Deshpande and Mazaj’s *World Cinema: A Critical Introduction* [2018] laudably includes African cinema, but since neither of these authors are Africanists the analyses lack some regional specificity). And second, there has been a tendency to focus on “arthouse” cinema and not reckon sufficiently with the power of popular cinema, particularly in non-EuroAmerican contexts.

The workshop attempted to address the ongoing marginalisation specifically of African films and filmmakers within Film and Screen Studies scholarship by insisting on putting Asian cinema scholars (who are also often marginalised, but have a more established space within the field) in conversation with African film, filmmakers, and film scholars. In this Dossier – as well as the larger “African Screen Worlds” project – we thus ask: how can we contribute to decolonising Film and Screen Studies through analysing and theorising filmmaking in and beyond Africa, and what benefits can be achieved for our discipline, and the film industry itself, by finding the similarities, differences and connections between filmmaking in Africa and elsewhere, on the basis of the diegetic screen worlds within the films themselves, and industrial screen worlds, encompassing production and circulation?

In this respect, we are pleased to be able to publish here the work of researchers who do in-depth research on specific African cinemas (Thomas on Amharic-language cinema, Singer on South African cinema, and Van de Peer on North African cinema), in partnership with scholars of specific Asian cinemas, so that in this way the most marginalised region within Film and Screen Studies – Africa – is brought into conversation with other regions from the non-EuroAmerican world to help make Africa and African film’s global connections and significance more visible. We hope this will help to mobilise against the tendency for African film scholarship to become relegated *only* to area studies on Africa, which prevents this research from having any impact on Film and Screen Studies (see Dovey 2016).

Africa has long had real and imagined relationships with the rest of the world, and cinema is no exception. For example, ground-breaking new research is showing how older film festivals in the Soviet Union, such as the Tashkent film festival, were extremely significant in the fostering of communist film relationships that included Africa (Djagalov and Salazkina 2016, Razlogova 2020). There is also archival research currently being done on the connections that formed in the Soviet Union – and, in particular, at the (V)GIK film school in Moscow (the world’s oldest film school, and where Film and Screen Studies actually began as a discipline – Salazkina 2016) – where many African (and Arab) filmmakers were given bursaries to study (Chomentowski 2019, Dovey 2020a). Historical

research on the relationship between Japanese filmmakers who worked in Africa is starting to be undertaken (see Centeno-Martin 2020), and there are remarkable stories of African filmmakers who worked with Japanese filmmakers during the Cold War yet to be told (for example, that of Tanzanian filmmaker Martin Mhando).

In our contemporary world, film relationships between African and Asian countries have been rapidly increasing, but remain largely unexplored in scholarship, except in the work of those scholars who have looked at the popularity of “Bollywood” in Africa (see, for example, Larkin [1997], Blom Hansen [2005], Adamu [2007], Fair [2009], Barlet [2010], Jedlowski [2018], and Ebrahim [2020]). China Central Television (CCTV) launched in Kenya in 2012, and new Chinese film festivals have recently sprung up on the continent. These include the Asian film festival in Abuja, Nigeria, launched in 2017 and the China-Africa Film Festival in Cape Town, South Africa, launched in 2017. Although not in large numbers, African characters are appearing in the diegetic screen worlds of East Asian films – for example, in box-office breaking, 2017 Chinese action film *Wolf Warrior II/Zhàn Láng 2* (Jing, 2015), which is analysed in the first two articles here (Nardy, Coates and Coates; Thomas and Berry). Ghanaian actor Sam Okyere has become increasingly popular in South Korea and the presence of Ghanaian-Korean actor Chris Lyon in the hit drama *Itaewon Class* (2020) directly engages with the immigrant experience in South Korea. Asian characters are also appearing in the diegetic screen worlds of African films, for example in *Waiting for Happiness* (Sissako, 2002), and in the Ethiopian film *Diplomat* (Gashaw, 2012) analysed in this Dossier (Thomas and Berry). Thai director Jakrawal Nilthamrong’s *Unreal Forest* (2010) – made as part of the International Film Festival of Rotterdam’s “Forget Africa” programme (Dovey 2015) – sees the director work with Zambian independent filmmakers to create a mix of self-reflexive documentary and a fictional short exploring the power of ancient folk laws. The connections are sometimes less obvious but nevertheless there; the Ugandan no-budget viral hit *Who Killed Captain Alex?* (Nabwana, 2015), features a ‘Ugandan Shaolin Monk’ called Bruce U in a direct homage to Hong Kong star Bruce Lee.

There are also fascinating similarities and differences between film traditions in African contexts and elsewhere even where there may have been no formal links – what we are here calling parallel developments, and which is explored in this Dossier in Han and Singer’s article about the representation of girlhood in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and post-1994 South African cinema. For example, the ground-breaking avant garde Senegalese film *Touki Bouki* (Mambety, 1973) emerged in the same year as a radical Palestinian manifesto for experimental cinema (Shanaah 2018); women-made science fiction films have recently blossomed in Kenya (e.g. *Pumzi* [Kahiu, 2009]) and Palestine (e.g. *Nation Estate* [Sansour, 2013]); and there are remarkable similarities between the films

of Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul and films from West Africa by directors such as Souleymane Cissé.

Why, then, is Africa barely mentioned in Film and Screen Studies, both past and present? These global screen connections that Africa shares with other regions – both actual and parallel – require detailed comparison and theorisation if we are to bring more accuracy and complexity to our field and if we are to stop reifying and idealising the role of the West in Film and Screen Studies (Bâ and Higbee 2012). At its best, scholarship in Film and Screen Studies has adopted an approach of “polycentrism” (Shohat and Stam 1994) – an attempt to decentre previously assumed centres while also attempting to interpret diverse non-western cinemas on their own terms (Najib, Perriam and Dudrah 2012: xxii). This brings us to the second issue with “world cinema” studies that we mentioned above – the tendency to focus on “arthouse” cinema and not reckon sufficiently with the power of popular cinema, particularly in non-EuroAmerican contexts. Here we want to turn to another dominant concept in Film and Screen Studies – and one referenced far more by our authors in this Dossier than “world cinema” – “transnational cinema”.

The fact that the phrase “transnational cinema” has become a response to the problems inherent in the concept of “world cinema” is evidenced by the recent surge in research on this topic, and the seeming preference for the former term (see the articles in the journal *Transnational Cinemas*, founded in 2010, and in particular Higbee and Lim 2010). Indeed, the “transnational” is a far more manageable concept, implicating as it does two or more contexts rather than the entire world. It is a more pragmatic concept, too, based on the understanding that in an era of globalisation and the internet, people and institutions frequently work across national borders, and that most nations have less power to regulate today than they did in the past (Ezra and Rowden 2006). At the same time, the term “transnational” incorporates the “national”, recognising the continued influence of the state as either an enabler or censor of filmmaking practices (Sanogo 2015) – something that is addressed by several of our authors here (see, for example, Thomas and Berry, who touch on issues of film censorship in the Ethiopian and Chinese contexts).

Higbee and Lim’s (2010) *critical* transnational approach to cinema is particularly important. They emphasise that one of the drawbacks of the term “transnational” is that “it risks celebrating the supranational flow or transnational exchange of peoples, images and cultures at the expense of the specific cultural, historical or ideological context in which these exchanges take place” (Higbee and Lim 2010: 11–12) – something that our authors here have attempted to respond to through providing such specific context to their cinematic analyses. In other words, the term “transnational” can, problematically, assume easy movement and

translation for the film scholar between diverse contexts rather than allowing for acknowledgment of where there may be limitations, blockages, or even brick walls to understanding. Most importantly, certain scholars continue to assume Hollywood’s global dominance, and of the oppositional and counterhegemonic nature of all other global filmmaking practices to this behemoth. For example, Ezra and Rowden barely acknowledge the existence of Bollywood and Nollywood, now widely accepted as larger film industries than Hollywood in terms of annual film output (Liston 2014), and with vast transnational reach in terms of their audiences (see Jaikumar 2003, Krings and Okome 2013). Bollywood, for example, remains far more popular than Hollywood not only at home but in many African contexts (such as East Africa and northern Nigeria; see Larkin 1997, Fair 2009).

Higbee and Lim argue that as film scholars we need to be able to account for mainstream as much as “arthouse” non-western cinemas (Higbee and Lim 2010). Here they pinpoint a broader problem in Film and Screen Studies – partly due to the bias towards “world cinema” frameworks – where “arthouse” or “film festival” cinema is frequently privileged and popular and commercial cinema is excluded altogether since it is seen as “low” art. However, we would argue that it is *only* through reckoning with the vast popularity of non-western film industries (as three of the four articles here do – in relation to historical and contemporary Japanese, Chinese, and Amharic-language Ethiopian film industries), that we can confront the most pressing questions concerning transnationality and – by extension – cross-cultural relationships. This is because “cultural production that is commercial and targets national publics creates a strong foundation for subsequent transnational circulation of goods produced locally and offers the best chance for competing with or even displacing cultural products circulating through the official global economy within the national and regional contexts” (Adejunmobi 2007: 11). Without that financial muscle, it is very difficult for non-western cinemas to compete with western cinemas in the global market.

However, as Higbee and Lim astutely argue, “it is often away from the popular that difficult questions about transnationality, such as those pertaining to (post) coloniality ... have been raised” (2010: 16). The first three articles in this dossier (Nardy, Coates and Coates; Thomas and Berry; Denison and Van de Peer) collectively provide evidence for *and* contest this argument in complex ways. These articles explore how filmmakers from East Asia (Japan and China) and Ethiopia have shared a tendency to stereotype people from other regions of the world, projecting their own imaginings, desires and fears onto racialised Others (see Said [1978] and Bhabha [1994] as the most oft-cited scholars on this topic). While a vast amount of cinema scholarship has critiqued Hollywood’s practices of producing screen stereotypes of Others (for example, Njambi and O’Brien [2018]),



very little has been written about how various Asian and African filmmakers have participated in this process, in complicated and contradictory ways. As Bhabha notes: “Even in the critical attempt to identify and apprehend the workings of stereotyping discourse one can end up reifying certain basic identity categories as stable and singular, as somehow avoiding the condition of multiple beliefs and split subjects which characterizes colonial environments” (1994: 67). For Bhabha (and this project) therefore, it is not about “the ready recognition of images as positive or negative” (ibid.). We wanted to explore instead the actual processes and narratives that have operationalised and utilised stereotypes, with “an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible ... through stereotypical discourse” (ibid.).

In particular, what emerges across these three articles is the deeply complex positioning of East Asia in relation to questions of externally and internally imposed imperialism, colonialism, and decolonisation, and processes of exoticisation and Othering. Whereas Thomas and Berry show how Ethiopian filmmakers often valorise Chinese characters in their films, with Ethiopian characters trusting Chinese characters and mistrusting American (or even American-educated diasporic Ethiopian) characters, this positive representation is not reciprocated in many of the historical and contemporary Japanese and Chinese films analysed across the three articles where moments of cross-cultural rapprochement and respect are regularly undermined by at best, hierarchical, and, at worst, racist stereotypes – showing all the ambivalence associated with repetitive colonial discourse that Bhabha speaks of (1994).

It is important to note here, before we provide overviews of these articles, that, while there has been significant scholarship about race in the context of the legacy of empire, postcolonial studies have often ignored and overlooked the dynamics present in East Asia. And yet the role that race and ethnicity plays in East Asia has an equally complex history and legacy. The Japanese Empire was the largest non-western empire of modern times and, like its European counterparts, was also involved in problematic practices of encouraging racial and cultural hierarchies that have legacies in the present.

Important scholarship on these issues includes Kun Huang’s work on blackness in China (2020), the AfricansinChina.net online research forum, Victoria Young’s exploration of decoloniality in the work of Okinawan writers (2020), Yasuko Takezawa’s work on Japanese engagement with race (2005, 2011), and Young Chu Kim’s exploration of Korean education (2016). These scholars have all sought to explore the interplay between race, nationalism, and decolonisation in specific East Asian contexts. One of the key studies, Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia as Method* (2010), has specifically sought to highlight the problematic trajectory of decolonisation in East Asia. However, as he argues, the ongoing legacies of

Japanese and Western imperialism have not been fully explored in the face of more than fifty years of political and cultural turbulence in East Asia, meaning that the initial stages have been “made possible only by the arrival of the so-called post-cold-war era of globalisation” (Chen 2010: 14). The first three articles in this Dossier build on and extend this important scholarship, but with specific attention to the cinematic depiction of Africans.

In their deeply historically informed overview of the representation of Africans in East Asian cinema, Nardy, Coates and Coates critique how “an imagined Africa” is “positioned as a reflexive device for envisaging both positive and negative futures, and the role of East Asian protagonists within a globalized future world.” Drawing on Elsaesser’s work on mind-game films, they provide a powerful argument that “In positing Africa as *pharmakon* in the way that Western culture has historically posited Africa and blackness as *pharmakon*, Chinese and Japanese film directors enact a what-if that comes dangerously close to simply replacing the overrepresented Western Man with an overrepresented East Asian Man.” They remind us that whether Africans are seen as the embodiment of “disease” or “cure” in these films, they are relegated to a marginal position from which they have no real agency, other than to confirm the subjectivity of the East Asian characters – much as in the conventional Hollywood films of the twentieth century that saw Africa as an adventure ground for White heroes (for example, *De Voortrekkers* [Shaw, 1916], *The African Queen* [Huston, 1951] and *Out of Africa* [Pollack, 1985]).

Thomas and Berry are similarly pessimistic about the representation of Africa in two contemporary Chinese films – *Wolf Warrior II* (Jing, 2017) and *Operation Red Sea* (Lam, 2018). Their analysis of these films leads them to question whether China has become the “new America” within Africa, and to ask: “Has the ‘white saviour’ become the Chinese saviour in these films? Has Africa become the ‘Chinese man’s burden’ (Xiang 2018)?” However, as noted above, they are far more optimistic when it comes to the representation of Chinese characters in popular Amharic-language cinema where, even though stereotypes of foreign Others remain at play, the Ethiopian filmmakers depict “China as a viable alternative to American aid” and capable of collaborating with in a way that the United States is not. What becomes ultimately liberating in the Ethiopian film *Diplomat* (2012), however, is the *self*-representation therein, where Ethiopian filmmakers show Ethiopian characters as agents of their own destiny who are able to successfully navigate their relationships with foreign agents from the United States, China, and also Egypt. Thomas and Berry also leave us with some vital questions about the methodologies we might use in future research, asking: “Is it appropriate to use terminology that implies a framework influenced by Said, developed to analyse Europe’s relationship to what it called the ‘Orient’, in the context of how China

imagines Africa or how Ethiopians imagine the Chinese in their midst? ... Alternatively, if we want to look to models other than Orientalism, what local conceptual frameworks, including historical ones, might also shape this imagination?" This is an invitation to film scholars to marshal deep local, cultural, and linguistic knowledge to think about these cross-cultural relationships afresh, while remaining sceptical and alert to power balances across our thoroughly globalised, neoliberal late capitalist world.

Denison and Van de Peer's article picks up and addresses these kinds of questions, engaging with Berghahn's important observation that "collapsed distances of globalisation and the transnational flows of media and people have resulted in a decentering of the exotic, which can no longer be exclusively understood as the projection of exotic fantasies of the other from one centre, the West [or the North], but which emanates from multiple localities and is multi-directional in perspective" (Berghahn cited in Denison and Van de Peer here). While not shying away from the more problematic racialised and gendered aspects of Japanese filmmaker Osamu Tezuka's adaptation of the *1001 Nights/Senya Ichiya Monogatari* (Yamamoto, 1969) – Denison and Van de Peer thoroughly plumb the ambivalence in this text, allowing them to finally argue that the film is "the result of a hybridised emancipatory creativity rooted both in African/Middle Eastern and Japanese storytelling practices" and that it "has been hybridised to such an extent that it rejects European or Western dominance and instead incorporates a wider array of expression not grounded in Orientalism but in the emancipation of the Orient, wherever it is located." This article emerged out of discussions at our workshop about shared sources, and many diverse links were made amongst cinema, art, literature, and politics. As many film scholars have shown, there is a long history of cross-cultural film adaptation and film re-making, however it is not often that sources are acknowledged as being grounded in or connected to African contexts. By focusing on how a particular Japanese anime adaptation of this famous source localises it in Japan, Denison and Van De Peer contribute to scholarship that reveals the fundamentally transnational dimensions of Japan's long history of (animated) filmmaking.

While the first two articles explore East Asian-African cross-cultural representations, and the third article explores shared sources between these regions, the fourth and final article does not explore literal transnational connections, but rather engages in comparative analysis through exploring parallel cinematic developments in post-revolutionary Iran and post-1994 South Africa. Han and Singer are concerned not with how South African and Iranian filmmakers have respectively represented one another's nations on film, but instead how distinct filmmakers in each context have represented the transitional, liminal experience of childhood (girlhood, in this case) during eras of national political transition – in remarkably similar ways. While the films they analyse

– *The Mirror* (Panahi, 1997) and *Life, Above All* (Schmitz, 2010) – could be said to fit neatly within the category of "world cinema" circulating on the international film festival circuit, rather than the popular forms of cinema explored in the previous articles, Han and Singer's methodology goes beyond the sometimes problematic "world cinema" approach we described before, by harnessing their respective, specific knowledges of South African and Iranian cinemas and putting themselves into conversation with one another to seek both similarities and differences. Here new possibilities for learning from one another emerge as we move beyond the stereotyping of people from one "nation" by another "nation", to an exploration of self-representation in which various forms of imagination, exoticisation, and idealisation nevertheless also manifest – in this case, through the authors' attention to how the adult filmmakers represent their girl-child protagonists. In both films, while the girls experience immense hardships, the liminality of childhood is seen to provide some possibility of release, agency, and perspective – we are invited into a liminal space in which the openness of children's points of view challenges the binary perspectives of adults (whether in relation to race, gender, nationality, religion, or other forms of identity). In their focus on this liminal (looking) space, and in their study of parallel rather than literal cinemas, Han and Singer also provide potential models for us as film scholars to try to open ourselves up beyond the rigid frameworks we have come to rely on to new perspectives, models, and methodologies.

Indeed, through "The Asian-African Film Connection" workshop and this Dossier, we have attempted to experiment with ways to create multiple frames of reference both in terms of content and methodology, and to reject the dynamic of East versus West, or North versus South, and focus on exploring the interchanges and intersections that can be seen when we place specific African and Asian films into dialogue. However, the workshop was also a good place to start confronting the imbalances within Film and Screen Studies in terms of the lack of diversity of staffing within our field. The vast majority of research and teaching in Film and Screen Studies (not only in the UK, but globally) has been undertaken by English-speaking, white, male scholars based in the West. We are pleased that the majority of our authors in this Dossier are women, and that several are early career researchers. However, something that became glaringly obvious to us was the geographical bias in our field, with far fewer African film scholars than Asian film scholars employed in the UK, and with a focus on East Asia over South and South East Asia. Even more important was our realisation that we are not at all a diverse group in terms of race and ethnicity and that significant work is required to decolonise our workforce (Dovey 2020b) so that our knowledge production – which we believe emerges out of subjective perspectives and lived experiences (Dovey

2020c) as much as rigorous research – becomes far more representative, accurate, and intersectional. If the kind of comparative scholarship on African and Asian cinemas we present here is to flourish, an awareness of and activism in relation to these structural inequalities is the next step – one that we have taken through attempting to redress these issues in the “Global Screen Worlds” strand of the “African Screen Worlds” project.

We used what we learned running “The Asian-African Film Connection” workshop to develop a much wider scope for our “Global Screen Worlds” project, putting out a global call for participation in which we particularly encouraged early career scholars, especially from diverse African and Asian backgrounds and contexts, to apply. We are thus delighted that our forthcoming edited collection called “Global Screen Worlds” that is developing out of this call has brought together a group of mostly female scholars, many of whom are based in Africa or Asia, and many of whom are early career scholars. Indeed, it was interesting to us that our call – which privileged grassroots, collaborative, co-authored work – seemed to attract applications mostly from women.

In “Global Screen Worlds”, we are building on our approach of pairing people up to co-author work, but this time it has been even more experimental: based on the submissions we received from people in different parts of the world, we have tried to connect scholars with shared interests but who have never met one another before. With the travel constraints of Covid-19, our planned in-person workshop for September 2021 has had to be delayed, meaning that it will be a long time until some of these co-authors will meet each other in person. However, what has been so inspiring and moving about our participants is their willingness to start developing a network of care, where we are coming together across the distances that separate us, through whatever digital mediums are available to us in our specific contexts, to try to keep working together, sharing ideas and co-developing research.

In these ways, our collective aim is not only to produce research that helps to make Film and Screen Studies more globally representative, accurate, and inclusive in content, but also in terms of who is participating and how. For, as Epstein and Morrell argue, as academics we require “the freedom to engage each other in dialogue and controversy, the ‘right’ to enter into the relational matrixes that create myths by which we live – not the myopic quest for past identities or lost cultures. Decolonisation is the portal by which we might freely question our social givens and converse with each other – co-creating new spaces as we go along” (2012: 469). Ultimately, our goal is to take on the stimulating but often difficult work of collaboration and co-authorship with one another, across diverse regions and intersectional identities, to challenge a ‘lone ranger’ approach to knowledge production and to insist that the dreams of decolonisation can only be achieved if we work towards them collectively.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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