COSMOPOLITAN CINEMA: TOWARDS A NEW TRAJECTORY IN COSMOPOLITAN THEORY

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SUMMARY

This dissertation constructs a new framework which assesses cinema in terms of its ethical philosophies and its commitment towards the ideals of global justice. Based on a re-configuration of cosmopolitan theory of the ’90s, this study shows how a new discursive reading of cosmopolitanism lends itself to a fresh way of looking at film in terms of their ethical and political ideologies.

Such a framework is needed considering the increasing critical recognition given to a number of recent socio-political ensemble films. Such films include Crash (2004), Letters from Iwo Jima (2006), Syriana (2005), Babel (2006). Released almost consecutively, these films not only share a similar multilinear/multi-protagonist ensemble narrative structure, but also appear to exhibit a transnational, humanist ethic. Whilst these films imagine an idealized borderless world however, they also struggle with the rooted solidarities of nation and culture. Because cosmopolitan theory embodies the same tension, it provides an apt framework through which these films can be read.

Popular in the 1990’s, cosmopolitan theory fell into disfavour following its entrenchment within an ideological deadlock. The theory was caught in an endless debate between the universal humanist dream of global community, and the impossibility and danger of this ambition. Traditional cosmopolitans embraced the idea of a borderless world, arguing that national, cultural and ethnic solidarities were the source of exclusion, divisiveness and conflict. Detractors however, argued that rooted national/cultural solidarities cannot be ignored in favour of an imaginary global community, nor should
diverse communities and identities be homogenized according to arbitrary notions of “universal human values.” My paper transcends these polemical arguments by developing a new trajectory for cosmopolitan theory. Instead of remaining trapped in a ceaseless debate between divergent ideologies, I demonstrate how a better way of looking at cosmopolitanism is to think of it as a continuous and never-ending negotiation between the universal-humanist desire for a global human community of human beings, and the acceptance of rooted solidarities. I argue that defining cosmopolitanism as process rather than an end-point is what keeps the very ethics of the cosmopolitan project alive.

The aim of this paper is thus double-pronged. I propose a fresh direction for cosmopolitan theory and at the same time, present a new approach to reading cinema. My paper analyses the four films mentioned above – *Crash, Letters from Iwo Jima, Syriana* and *Babel* – according to this new “Discursive Cosmopolitanism.” I demonstrate how true cosmopolitan cinema involves the discursive and continuous negotiation between the receding goal of universalism and the “given-ness” of culture – a process which must never become static or resolved in order to maintain the project’s very integrity.
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Fig. 1. Promotional poster for *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

Fig. 2. Promotional poster for *Saving Private Ryan*. 
Introduction: A New Theory for Cinema

After the dust had settled on 9/11 and “The War on Terror,” there appeared to be increasing recognition for Hollywood films centered on social and political critique, particularly of American politics and global affairs. At the 2005 78th Academy Awards, Paul Haggis’s Crash (2004) won an Oscar for Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay for its exploration of racial prejudice in urban Los Angeles. A fellow Oscar nominee was Stephen Gaghan’s Syriana (2005) – a critique of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. In 2006, Alejandro Gonzalez Iñárritu’s Babel (2006) was nominated for seven Oscars. An empathetic yet cutting exploration of the lives of a transnational cast of characters, Iñárritu’s film critiques global systems where individual destinies are irrevocably determined by the power inequities between nations. Babel was up against Clint Eastwood’s Letters from Iwo Jima (2006), a Japanese account of World War II – a perspective so far absent in American media and popular cinema.

Equipped with a supposedly liberal attitude toward social and world politics, these films attempt a critique of inequity and difference, particularly within the divisions of nation, race, and religion – issues foremost in public consciousness since the resurgence of conservative U.S. nationalism and the policing of racial and religious difference following 9/11. In search of a common human experience, these films appear to desire a transcendence of cultural difference. Despite such universally humanist intentions however, these films struggle with the divisiveness of identity politics – of real and existing loyalties to particular nations and ethnic groups. My interest lies in the tension between the divergent ideals of a borderless world and the rootedness of identity politics,
embodied within these cinematic texts. Whilst on the one hand, these films share a vain hope of unearthing a deeper understanding and connection between all humanity, on the other, they are unable to escape the existing bifurcating loyalties to ethnicity and country.

To explore this dilemma, I draw on cosmopolitan theory of ‘90s which is also divided by the same dueling ideologies – a desire for a worldwide community of human beings, and the realization that national, cultural and ethnic solidarities are unlikely to disappear. By negotiating the deadlock within the theory, I hope to establish a new trajectory of cosmopolitan thought which also extends itself to a new reading of cinema.

This dissertation focuses on the four films previously mentioned – *Crash*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *Syriana* and *Babel*. Other than having similar ideological perspectives and anxieties, these films share an ensemble narrative structure in which the plural accounts of multiple characters replace the objective singular protagonist. This multilinear narrative with its interwoven storylines is best described as “hyperlink cinema,”¹ a term coined by Alissa Quart and popularised by critic Roger Ebert.² As we shall see, *Babel, Crash, Syriana* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* use the ensemble structure to explore the perspectives of characters from diverse national or ethnic positions, including those sidelined in mainstream Hollywood. By establishing connections between their

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¹ In this essay I use the terms “hyperlink cinema” and “ensemble cinema” almost interchangeably, the only difference being that the former refers to a wider set of cinematic features as identified by Quart and Ebert, whilst the latter refers more specifically to the ensemble narrative structure per se. As this essay focuses mostly on the ensemble feature of hyperlink cinema however, my references to hyperlink cinema refer to the ensemble narrative form.

² Quart coins the term “hyperlink cinema” to describe the influence of the World Wide Web on film structure. Features such as the manipulation of linear time, flashbacks/forwards, intersecting storylines between multiple characters and so on, are described as features of “hyperlink cinema.” See “Networked,” *Film Comment*. Jul/Aug 2005. Roger Ebert in a review of *Syriana*, popularizes the term and establishes a definition of hyperlink cinema as films in which multiple characters and action sequences exist in separate stories, though a connection or link between these disparate stories is revealed in the course of the movie. See http://rogerebert.suntimes.com.
various narrators, these films also imagine a common link between all humanity; even whilst the juxtaposition of characters paradoxically draws attention to differences in nationality, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. With the expression of polyphonic, multi-national voices through the ensemble narrative, these films initially appear to transcend traditionally defined divisions and static identities in search of an underlying, universal humanity – despite still being paradoxically trapped within a narrative structure which highlights rather than diffuses visible difference.

The political ensemble drama therefore embodies cosmopolitan philosophies and struggles which have, till recently, been overshadowed by the more colourful narratives of patriotism such as *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) and *Black Hawk Down* (2001). In contrast, the newfound popularity of the cosmopolitan drama some years after 9/11 and the “War on Terror” speak of a new way of reckoning and seeing the world, pointing to new questions and anxieties within the cinematic text. What is needed therefore, is a framework with which this form of film might be read within the context of current world events and social attitudes. The films’ philosophical and thematic purpose of seeking an elusive humanist ethic should also be acknowledged. Just as the emergence of postcolonial writers provoked the development of “postcolonial theories” in literature, perhaps the popularity of these ensemble films suggest the need for a conceptual framework able to analyse these texts in context with their ethical agenda. Cosmopolitanism, as an ideological project, provides this very theoretical approach.

The “cosmopolitanism” to which I refer to here is not the watered-down notion of the “melting-pot,” but the precise and situated debates between nationalism and global
communities discussed by cosmopolitan theorists of the ’90s. Following the advent of globalization in the ’80s and ’90s, the politics surrounding cosmopolitanism, known as “cosmopolitics,” took on the struggle between national loyalty and the concept of a global community. Optimists such as Martha Nussbaum held to the Stoic and Kantian ideal of a “worldwide community of human beings” (1994: 4), and argued that “the politics of nationalism” was really “the politics of difference” (1994: 2) and therefore had to be transcended. Other detractors criticized the Enlightenment tendency toward the “universal” as a naïve and dangerous essentialism which threatened to eliminate real differences and pretend the absence of contested identity politics. Others such as Appiah argued for a “rooted cosmopolitan[ism]” (1998: 91) in which the co-existence of patriotism and the respect for all peoples could be worked out. Whatever the debate, the crux of cosmopolitics rests in its very instability of meaning and in the unresolved to-and-fro debate between a rooted identity, and a universal ideal – the same anxieties apparent in the films I address. As cosmopolitan discourse is famously rife with the fractious contentions between national identity on the one hand, and the ideal of a global humanity on the other, it presents itself as an apt epistemological approach to the anxiety ridden post-9/11 ensemble drama.

This thesis is thus also an exploration of the philosophical potential of cosmopolitanism as an ethical and contextual framework for which this genre of cinema may be read. How might these old and problematic cosmopolitan theories be re-assessed and re-configured so that they may provide an enlightening way of reading and accessing the “cosmopolitan ensemble drama”? In what ways can human society work toward a world of mutual respect without calling on problematic rhetoric such as the “universal”?
The question now at hand is whether we can speak of a new “cosmopolitanism” – an emancipatory project of a global consciousness – and if so, what forms this new cosmopolitanism ought to take (Cheah, 1998: 291). My project is to delineate a new concept of cosmopolitanism which not only surmounts its traditional dialectic tug of war, but is able to account for both nationalism and the imaginings of a global community. Indeed, much potential lies in nudging cosmopolitan thought away from this dialectic deadlock and toward a more discursive theory which places emphasis on the project and process of the cosmopolitical effort rather than its static definition. Instead of remaining trapped in a ceaseless debate between universal-humanist ideals and rooted identities, I argue how it is better to think of cosmopolitanism as a constantly discursive process whereby the impossible notion of a universal, humanist community is desired and worked towards, but can ultimately never be obtained.³

The aim of this paper is therefore double pronged. Not only do I hope to develop a new cinematic framework for the reading of political ensemble dramas, I also wish to discuss the concept of cosmopolitanism and advocate its re-invention as a philosophical ideal in the reading of film. A reconfiguration of cosmopolitan philosophies towards a greater discursivity provides the means of reading this genre of political hyperlink cinema within its intended ethics of humanism, justice, and global responsibility.

I do not intend to claim that these Hollywood films succeed in becoming “truly cosmopolitan,” representative of all humanity and devoid of partiality to any nation, ethnicity, or social system. To do so would ignore the work of cultural critics of the past

³ The term “discursive” in this paper references its connotation of flux and negotiation within the symbolic realm of language and text. As shall be demonstrated, discursive cosmopolitanism is a practice of shifting ideologies – a symbolic reconfiguration rather than a material end-point.
two decades who deconstructed the malevolent invisibility of dominant cultural ideologies in texts claiming to be “universal.” Indeed, a major part of this paper is dedicated toward problematizing the so-called transnational and cosmopolitan ambitions of these texts.

Nevertheless, should we, in the footsteps of critics such as E. San Juan, Jr, Gayatri Spivak and countless others, condemn a text for its failure to depart from a dominant culture or ideology? Or is it possible to meander from this now familiar path of almost militant criticism in search of a more inclusive and certainly less rigid approach? I am not proposing that we ignore the problematic political and ideological aspects of these films, but I am wondering if it is possible to perform a reading of a Hollywood text which goes beyond the proverbial accusations of insidious cultural myopia. As much as it is important to critically deconstruct a text for its inherent problems, it is also important to pay attention to its intentions. Reading a film in terms of the politics of cosmopolitanism permits an integration of both the anxieties and the well-meaning ambitions of the Hollywood hyperlink film within a socio-political context – an approach more flexible and open-ended than an antagonistic attitude towards Hollywood.

Before embarking upon a discussion on cosmopolitanism and cinema however, it is pertinent to address why a new cosmopolitan reading of contemporary cinema is called for as opposed to using existing frameworks. The rest of this introductory chapter will discuss the popularity of this new cinematic genre in recent years and explain how existing critical frameworks in postcolonial and transnational theory fall short in advocating a full understanding and appreciation of these cosmopolitan films.
Beyond Postcolonialism, Before Transnational Anxieties

If you want to know what the American mass psyche is after 9/11, one of the places you can go to find out is the movies...Movies reflect and pilot changes in American culture...through Hollywood’s own formational system: film genres...genres changed, faded away, returned remodeled, or blossomed.”

-- Joseph Natoli. *This is a Picture and Not the World.*

Considering how September 11, 2001 has been established as the new temporal demarcation in American history, it is not surprising to witness the impact of 9/11 ripple across the silver screen. Various shifts in Hollywood’s trends can be observed in tandem with the public’s efforts to come to terms with the event and its aftermath (Jones, 2006: 156). For instance, Hollywood reflected the sudden conservatism that arose in America after the attack (O’Neil, 2006: 45), by avoiding politically critical films which could lead to an interrogation of America’s own complicated role in 9/11. Instead “safe” melodramas about the heroism of everyday people, such as *United 93* (2006), became popular (Martin-Jones, 2007: 156).

Eventually, however, patriotic ardour cooled and doubts regarding America’s continued aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan started to surface (Hixson, 2008: 304). As attention started to focus on larger notions of inter-national and inter-cultural relations, political hyperlink films with an interest in social criticism and which explored the narratives of marginalized groups, simultaneously moved to the foreground. The task

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4 Joseph Natoli observes how Whitehouse rhetoric has demarcated 9/11 as a turning point in American history. Hyping up trauma supported corporate capitalism as well as “a market-sponsored neo-conservative” state regime (2007: 145).

5 This was arguably catalysed by the failure to attain victory, and not because of any self-critical realization of the destructiveness and hypocrisy of America’s foreign policy for the last century.
now at hand is to determine if existing frameworks offer a way in which the increasing significance of this genre may be read; or if a new theory is called for.

A methodical attempt to address representations of racially marginalized groups, critique imperialist ideologies, and draw attention to Third World cinema was set in motion in the 1970’s following the work of Ariel Dorfman, Ralph and Natacha Friar, and Donald Bogle (Shohat and Stam, 2003: 3). The burgeoning esteem for postcolonial theory in the 1980’s popularised a poststructuralist impulse which encouraged the breaking down of boundaries and national-ethnic categories previously accepted as givens. Following this, whiteness studies emerged in the late ‘90s as a response to critiques leveled against the perceived normativity of whiteness and the Euro-American centre. For the first time whiteness was “outed” as “just another ethnicity” (Shohat and Stam, 2003: 3) and its previously taken-for-granted privileges were made answerable to the rest of the world. Since their advent, these poststructuralist social theories have reconfigured how the world is imagined. Pluralism, multiple perspectives, and the deconstruction of binaries between centre-periphery, became popular in critical theory.

These intellectual discourses furnish us with the vocabulary for reading “cosmopolitan cinema.” Cosmopolitanism credits its origins to the notions of cultural deconstruction and relativism set in motion by these ways of thinking. A reading of “cosmopolitan cinema” therefore borrows strongly from the rhetoric of heterogeneity, pluralism, and border-crossing, as popularized by postcolonial theory.

However, when considering notions such as the postcolonial and the Third World, one cannot ignore Aijaz Ahmad’s essays in his work, In Theory (1992). Ahmad’s
trenchant criticism of the abstractions of such categorical headings such as “Third World” or “Postcolonial” makes an unselfconscious usage of these terms near impossible. Neil Larsen comments,

[Ahmad] confronts directly what must be one of the crucial issues in any critical or theoretical discussion of postcolonialism, namely, its demonstrable affinities for a philosophy that has declared itself the enemy of all notions of identity and fixed meaning, indeed – in its latest, postmodern strain – of any tendency for thought to ground itself in universal principles of whatever sort. (Larsen, 2000: 141)

The major problem with postcolonial theory is its axiomatic reliance on poststructural thought and thus, its over-ambitious willingness to deconstruct principles of identity, and to avoid any form of universality. What Larsen and Ahmad protest then, is postcolonialism’s tendency to drift away from specificities of race, culture and nation. Ahmad warns, “when applied too widely, powerful terms of this kind simply lose their analytic power, becoming mere jargon” (1995: 67).

Furthermore, in the course of thinking about theoretical approaches to cosmopolitan cinema, one notes a strange paradox in the axioms of postcolonial theory. Not only does the postcolonial appear to configure itself as the enemy of all notions of identity, it almost paradoxically seems to have difficulty progressing beyond its origins of a history of enmity between the First World and the Third. Even whilst dedicating its efforts toward the critique of essentialism and fixed meaning, postcolonial thought seems unable to escape the dialectic of the colonizer and the colonized – a bifurcating classification of “either-or” fixed identities that force us into increasingly claustrophobic positions, especially in the face of transnational mobility and exchange. Despite postcolonialism’s rootedness in poststructural sentiment, or perhaps because of its resistance towards pre-determined power structures and oppressive categories,
postcolonial discourse tends to bifurcate and separate rather than to seek coherence and unification. Traditional forms of postcolonial theory, though undoubtedly helpful in the schematic deconstruction of oppressive ideologies or of essentialising gendered or racial identities and prejudices, are limiting for not allowing one to venture beyond the historically rooted dichotomies of the colonizer and colonized.6

This project therefore searches for a theory of cross-national social interactions and cinema which moves beyond the politics of resistance and dialectical struggle that marked the intellectual projects of the ‘70s to the ‘90s. The impetus to do so is not so much an exercise in wishful thinking, but a realization garnered from a careful observation of the emerging themes within popular media. The efforts made by film industries such as Hollywood to address notions of transnationalism, inter-national interactions, and the elusive possibility of a universal human narrative, calls for a theory of readership which is able to embrace and conceptualize this emerging cosmopolitan ethic. This means, to some extent, that one must venture beyond familiar configurations of the Third World versus the First. My intention is to transcend a certain tendency in critical theory to “pit a rotating chain of marginalized communities against an unstated white norm, or to pit various Third World cultures against a Western norm” (Shohat and Stam, 2003: 4).

That said however, this thesis by no means seeks to discount the multiplicity of perspectives and positions that would not be conceived if postcolonial theory had not been developed. I gloss over the many refinements since made. I do not claim to encompass every element of postcolonial theory exhaustively. Furthermore, many postcolonial critics and theorists are to some extent skeptical of poststructuralist theory. “Nevertheless, the basic premises of post-structuralist thought are grudgingly retained” (Ahmad, 2000: 155). Ahmad’s critique of postcolonial theory lies in his questioning of poststructuralism as a persisting tenet of post-colonial thought. It is valid to say therefore, that the link between postcolonialism and poststructuralism is not easily broken.

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6 The field of post-colonialism has greatly developed and I gloss over the many refinements since made. I do not claim to encompass every element of postcolonial theory exhaustively. Furthermore, many postcolonial critics and theorists are to some extent skeptical of poststructuralist theory. “Nevertheless, the basic premises of post-structuralist thought are grudgingly retained” (Ahmad, 2000: 155). Ahmad’s critique of postcolonial theory lies in his questioning of poststructuralism as a persisting tenet of post-colonial thought. It is valid to say therefore, that the link between postcolonialism and poststructuralism is not easily broken.
opened the gates to cultural and political deconstruction. It was postcolonial enquiry and its other post-structural affiliates which led to the challenging of previously unquestioned boundaries of ethnic and national difference – the very basis of cosmopolitanism that we are seeking to recover. The bold efforts of postcolonial and poststructuralist pioneers provided the platform and the voice to look forward and dream of an ideal vision for humanity. This paper’s effort to review cosmopolitanism itself grows from a familiarity with postcolonial criticism and the ethics which postcolonial thought have bred. The urge to seek a larger, more unifying and pro-humanist understanding of the world can therefore be viewed as a culmination, or at least an extension, of postcolonial theory. My task here is to grow beyond the bifurcating effects of postcolonial struggles of the ‘80s and ‘90s in search of a more unifying epistemology of human society and social politics.

Perhaps in response to the same dissatisfactions concerning the limiting dialectic of postcolonial frameworks, other globalization theories have emerged in the late ‘90s also seeking to theorize identity politics in a world of increasing international mobility and diaspora. Of these, the relatively new and increasingly popular field of transnational theory seems most relevant to this paper’s search for a new cinematic theory for the political ensemble film. By addressing transnationalism briefly, I will explain why recent globalization theories are losing significance, and why cosmopolitanism on the other hand, is still able to retain its idealized notions for humanity and social politics.

“Transnationalism,” as “a process of global consolidation” (Bamyeh, 1993: 1), is more than just rhetoric of global capitalism. The term “transnational” ideally contains a subtext of social heterogeneity and a tolerance for plural nationalisms and national

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narratives – a responsibility to what Martin Jacques identifies as the “diversity, decentralization, and internationalization” (1988: 1) of today’s world.

Having emerged in an age of multi-national corporations and trans-national consumption however, the “transnational” has become infused with discourse surrounding the notion of multi-national corporations – whereby the plain existence of businesses, production lines, mobility, and consumption across borders sufficiently qualifies as a transnational experience (Beck, 2008: 28). Like many other new terms which emerged in response to issues on globalism and globalization, “transnationalism” is too often used to denote notions of global corporations, rather than emphasizing an ideological transcendence of dominant national narratives in favour of the heterogeneous and inter-national.8

The problem is that “transnational cinema” inherits the vagueness of the term itself. Little distinction appears to be made between a transnational production, a transnationally consumed film, and what we would call a truly “transnational text” – a film that works toward thematically reaching for a transnational ethic. Judging from a variety of essays written on Asian international cinema for instance, the term is already used somewhat loosely and capriciously.9 Often, the “transnational” has become a convenient and catchy way of simply referring to cross-border mobility, of whatever form and permutation.

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8 See Leslie Sklair’s “A Transnational Framework for Theory and Research in the Study of Globalization” in *Frontiers Of Globalization Research*. Sklair claims that “globalization… is nothing but globaloney…globalization as a sociological concept has always been too frail to sustain the theoretical and substantive burdens loaded on to it” (2008: 93).

As a result, a whole spectrum of films ranging from non-American to Hollywood adaptations, films with multinational casts and crew, non-American films made popular abroad etcetera, have been loosely labeled as “transnational,” whether or not they espouse a transnational ethic or philosophy. To accept that a film is “transnational” for as long as it has international elements in its production, distribution and reception, is not only rudimentary but also very problematic. What happens when dominant media industries claim a particular film to be “transnational” simply by virtue of being a transnational production? What are the implications, for instance, when Hollywood’s Orientalist drama *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005) is passed of as transnational simply because it has Asian actors and is set in Asia? The coming together of a nationally diverse cast and crew in a transnational production should not be mistaken for a transnational text – which ideally suspends dominant national narratives in the interest of negotiating other nationalisms. Any framework that wishes to understand cinema for its thematic and philosophical values, must realize this crucial distinction. Or else, as Masao Miyoshi warns in “A Borderless World,” powerful terms such as transnationalism risk becoming a domineering process in which industries such as Hollywood, once deterritorialized, are ready to consume any local or indigenous site of resistance/difference within the ideology of a “borderless” sphere (1996: 92).

Because of the instability in their definitions and an undiscerning closeness to discourse on global neoliberal capitalism, potentially redeeming concepts such as “transnationalism” have lost their cultural and analytical immediacy. For our purposes, a framework better situated within the discourse of nation and culture is needed. This
framework must be able to make the crucial differentiation between production and text, paying special attention to the ethical ideologies espoused within a particular film.

As opposed to the arduous task of recuperating such irretrievably problematic terms, I choose to revisit the politics of cosmopolitanism as a viable ideological vehicle. Cosmopolitanism, unlike newer globalization theories, is rooted in a philosophical tradition in which the values of global justice defined the beginnings of cosmopolitan thought. The vestiges of Enlightenment values of universalism and humanism also prevent cosmopolitanism’s degeneration into a dialectic between colonizer/colonized, First World/Third World. Even if cosmopolitics itself suffers from constant ideological dispute, this adds, rather than detracts from its potential for re-invention and growth. The next chapter will look into the history, discourse, and disputes surrounding the subject of cosmopolitanism and in doing so, will explain in greater detail why reading cinema cosmopolitically offers an enlightening way of approaching the post-9/11 hyperlink drama. It will also delineate a new cosmopolitan theory that is based on greater dicursivity and awareness of cosmopolitanism as a continuous process. Subsequent chapters then analyze each of the four films along a spectrum of how well they support this new configuration of cosmopolitanism in cinema.
Chapter 1: **New Cosmopolitanisms**

What exactly is the nature of the term “cosmopolitan?” Such a seemingly innocuous query provokes highly contested responses. Whilst the term brings to mind optimistic visions of global citizenship for some, for others the “cosmopolitan” is viewed pejoratively as unrealistic and even dangerously ignorant of cultural, ethnic, and racial solidarity. The term itself has a long history within the social sciences, extending back to ancient Greek philosophy (e.g. Diogenes) and later flourishing during the Enlightenment with the writings of Kant, among many others (Beck, 2003: 16). Since the late 1990’s however, critical theory has rediscovered and reconfigured a “new cosmopolitanism,” leading to “a sharp increase in literature that attempts to relate discourse on globalization (in cultural and political terms) to a redefinition of cosmopolitanism for the global age” (Beck, 2003: 16).

Etymologically, the term “cosmopolitan” is derived from “kosmo-polis,” a combination of the Greek words for “world” and “citizen” (Cheah, 1998: 22). The cosmopolitan, in its most distilled meaning, underscores an “intellectual ethic, a universal humanism that transcends regional particularism” (Cheah, 1998: 22). It refers to a plural membership to simultaneously different nations and cultural groups, which is inclusive rather than exclusive. As shall be discussed, it is the extent to which this notion of inclusivity and exclusivity should be defined however, which has become the source of consternation among contemporary critical theorists. The place of the modern nation-state within the cosmopolitan ethic is probably the most contested subject in cosmopolitics. Whilst thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum argue for a world citizenship
beyond the policed confines of national borders, others such as Craig Calhoun caution against a dismissal of national solidarities, arguing that nations serve necessary social functions which remain even amid globalization. I shall be looking at these two key positions in the rest of this chapter.

Tracing the contested meanings of the “cosmopolitan” through these intellectual traditions and debates is crucial in understanding the nature of the cosmopolitical itself. The very unstable nature of the “cosmopolitan” is precisely where the cosmopolitan concept harbours the most potential for social theory. This chapter recounts the history of the cosmopolitan and explores the debate existing in cosmopolitics today. Section 1.1 is dedicated to the historical background of the debate and sets out the two contesting positions which wrestle to claim the definition of “cosmopolitanism”: the universal-humanist position which is the view that everyone should embrace a global kinship, and a realist position which argues for a “rooted” version of cosmopolitanism which respects the reality of ethnic and national solidarity. Section 1.2 and 1.3, respectively explores my take on the situation and then forwards a reading of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitanism in cinema which progresses beyond the dialectical struggles of existing cosmopolitan theory.

1.1 Cosmo-Politics

The highest hopes of the century rested in the brave ideal of international peace and cooperation, based on a kind of world citizenship that would transcend the narrow boundaries of patriotism and put a final end to war and colonial power.

-- Jonathan Ree, 1998
Some claim that the world is gradually becoming united, that it will grow into a brotherly community as distances shrink and ideas are transmitted through the air. Alas, you must not believe that men can be united in this way.

-- Fyodor Dostoevsky, 1880

The idea of international peace has a long history, far preceding the formation of the modern nation-state, first observed in the work of the ancients. The Greek philosopher Diogenes, was one of the first recorded who spoke of the promise of being “citizens of the world” (quoted in Nussbaum, 1994: 2). The Stoics who followed argued that factions and local allegiances divided and estranged humanity from within. As Stoicism began to strongly influence Christian ethics following the merger with the Roman Empire, what Appiah refers to as the “Christian cosmopolitan” (1998: 92) began to take root in public consciousness. Centuries later, early modern theorists such as Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf (Wood, 1998: 60) addressed the “right of nations” with a concept of international law. In the late seventeenth century, Gotfried Wilhelm Leibniz and William Penn proposed that an international European authority would guarantee peace between Christian peoples (Wood: 1998: 60). These early imaginings of a larger human community predate modern cosmopolitan theory, establishing the fact that earlier forms of the cosmopolitan vision have been around for a very long time.

The predecessor to modern cosmopolitan theory is most often credited however, to Immanuel Kant’s “Project for a Perpetual Peace,” published in 1796. In this volume, which compiled a decade’s worth of research and philosophical writing, Kant proposed the idea of a world political community grounded in ethical fairness for all people in a “perfect civil union of mankind” (Kant, 1991: 51). Kant defined cosmopolitanism as a “way of combining the universal and the particular, Nation und Weltburger – nation and world citizenship” (Beck, 2003: 17). In this world system, he advocates an international
federation of states governed by a system of international law, so as to achieve peace among all humanity. Through an appeal to the Enlightenment values of human rationalism and logic, Kant points out that the cosmopolitan dream ought to be the next logical aspiration for mankind. It was his hope that “a universal cosmopolitan existence” (Kant, 1970: 51) would eventually be realized as “the highest purpose” (51) for humanity.

Kant’s writing is most often cited by contemporary cosmopolitan theorists as the initiation of modern cosmopolitan theory. Kant’s cosmopolitanism represents a turning point in which political morality is conceived – a formulation of political ethics beyond the borders of the state or polis. Cheah notes, “[Kant’s] vision remains the single most important philosophical source for contemporary normative theories of international relations, including accounts of global civil society and the international public sphere” (1998: 23). It was the ever relevant nature of Kant’s philosophy, as well as the optimism in his vision, which led to the revival of interest in Kant’s work on cosmopolitanism with the arrival of globalization in the ‘80s and ‘90s.

Economic globalization meant the intensification of international trade and financial flows across borders. Labour migration, the ease of global travel, and of course, mass communications, led to freer flows of cultures and ideologies (though often in favour of dominant industries/nations). Supranational units such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NATO, as well as various NGO’s, have emerged demanding larger accountabilities and responsibilities beyond the nation-state. Public discourse, from academia to the tabloids, tried to make sense out of this phenomenon, struggling with buzzwords such as “transnationalism,” “global culture flows,” and
“hybrid identities.” Intellectuals and politicians sought ways to theorize and control the multiple frictions that occur when the global movement and interaction of people, capital, and ideologies, necessitate a cohabitation of cultural space.

Discourse on the subject of national, ethnic, and racial solidarities in particular, became ideological minefields – especially when questions of inclusivity and exclusivity, permeable and impermeable borders, were inevitably brought forward. Arguably the most prominent of these debates involved the needfulness of national solidarity and the relevance of the nation-state in a world increasingly seen to be dominated by global flows. This period, which Ulrich Beck calls the “Second Modernity” (2003: 21), is marked by an articulation of new “pluralistic and multi-ethnic complexes combining elements that would formerly have been kept apart by national and cultural barriers” (Beck 2003: 21). In other words, globalization awakened anxieties on national and ethnic solidarities by revealing the permeability and fragility of national boundaries that nineteenth-century ideas of national citizenship held to be intact and immovable.

It was at about this point in the second half of the ’90s that new cosmopolitanism emerged with force.10 Unsurprisingly, cosmopolitics of the ’90s inherit the same anxieties existing within globalization discourse on the future of the nation state. On the one hand, post-nationalists argue that social structures and institutions are becoming transnational and they predict the likelihood of the nation-state losing its grip and relevance in the

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10 The exact reasons why are vague although there are clear historical circumstances initiating its revival. The failure of U.S. identity politics of multiculturalism (see Bruce Robbins’s “Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism” and E. San Juan Jr’s In the Wake of Terror) compelled a turn toward cosmopolitanism as a name for the genuine striving toward mutual translatability (Robbins, 1998: 13). The end of the Cold War marked a resurgence of U.S. nationalism and ethno-religious nationalism elsewhere, calling for ethical mediation. Hollinger cites the “challenges to provincial orientations presented by the economic and technological processes that get called ‘globalization’” (2002: 228) as a reason why the idea of cosmopolitanism was revived as a possible alternative to nationalism.
globalizing world. Stemming from this post-nationalist impulse, are the universal-humanists who hold to the values of old cosmopolitanism – liberals and idealists who embrace world citizenship and envision a departure from nationalism and ethnocentrism. Theorists such as Martha Nussbaum mark this end of the spectrum. The other is occupied by nationalist-realists such as Craig Calhoun who argue that the notion of a world polis is not only impossible, but also dangerous because of its potential to homogenize/universalize diverse national cultures into a featureless lump. They believe that national units are an ultimate social reality and that national entities, identities, and solidarities are indispensable and unlikely to disappear. More communitarian in outlook, they acknowledge the primal need for belonging to a particular group which the global, open-door sentiment of cosmopolitanism fails to offer. This is the contradiction – the tension between the hope for global humanism and the reality of national solidarities, that cosmopolitanism of the ’90s struggles with. I will now review some of the key figures in cosmopolitics from either side of the dialectic in more detail, so as to establish a good idea of the current politics of cosmopolitan theory.

Martha Nussbaum’s work is most representative of the universalist-humanist branch of cosmopolitan theory in the mid-’90s. Her most notable works include “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” published in the 1994 Boston Review, and For Love of Country? (1994). Her clear stand on the side of universal-humanism offers us a good entry point into the whole cosmopolitical debate. Nussbaum’s work has been described as brave by some and pointlessly utopic by others for its determined belief in “the very old

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11 See Andrew Marshall, “Breaking Up the Communities” in After the Nation State.
ideal of the cosmopolitan, the person whose primary allegiance is to the community of human beings in the entire world” (Nussbaum, 1994:1). Drawing on the tradition and learning of the Stoics, she argues that “we should give our first allegiance to no mere form of government, no temporal power, but to the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings” (1994: 2). Beyond paying cursory attention to ideas of international human rights, Nussbaum argues that to progress beyond the dangerously exclusive solidarities of nationhood, education must teach students to make all human beings of every nation and culture “part of our community of dialogue and concern” (1994: 2).13 World citizenship rather than democratic/national citizenship should become education’s central focus.

It is this unrelenting idealistic stance which sets Nussbaum apart from various other cosmopolitan theorists who, wary of sounding naïve and even dismissive of the particularities of national and cultural experience, avoid committing fully to the old cosmopolitan values.14 She chooses to adhere to a purist interpretation of Kant’s Enlightenment notions of cosmopolitan universalism.

Because of this idealism however, Nussbaum’s text has often been the target of critique by national-realists emerging in the later half of the 90’s. They disagree with the

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13 “Is it sufficient for [students] to learn that they are above all citizens of the United States, but that they ought to respect the basic human rights of citizens of India, Bolivia, Nigeria, and Norway? Or should they, as I think – in addition to giving special attention to the history and current situation of their own nation – learn a good deal more than is frequently the case about the rest of the world in which they live, about India and Bolivia and Nigeria and Norway and their histories, problems, and comparative successes?...Most importantly should they be taught that they are above all citizens of the United States, or should they instead be taught that they are above all citizens of a world of human beings…?” (Nussbaum, 1994: 2)

14 Recent cosmopolitan studies present permutations such as rooted cosmopolitanism, vernacular cosmopolitanism, practicing cosmopolitanism, banal cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan patriotism, and other configurations. All these variant branches, or “modifying adjectives” (Hollinger, 2002: 229), attempt to seek a middle ground between the two competing impulses in cosmopolitan theory. Upon inspection however, most cosmopolitans either lean toward an allegiance with either ideology, or slip into awkward abstractions which struggle to find a compromise between the irreconcilability of the rooted or the universal-humanist worldviews.
pluralist fantasy central to humanist-idealists and indeed criticize universal-humanists such as Nussbaum for holding onto antiquated definitions of the cosmopolitan even in an age highly sensitive to the intricacies of social-politics and identity-making. The contestation can be traced to contemporary cultural criticism’s disagreement with the perceived problems of Kant’s Enlightenment values – from which old cosmopolitanism first originated and on whom Nussbaum relies (Hollinger, 2002: 228). Contemporary cultural criticism accuses Kant’s Enlightenment values of cosmopolitanism for being insensitive to diversity, identity politics, power inequalities and the need for politically viable solidarities (Hollinger, 2002: 228). They were, in other words, deemed to be universalising and homogenising.

Whilst most would agree that Kant’s universalist notion of a worldwide “brotherhood” of humanity is highly problematic in a post-Marxist and postcolonial era sensitive to the politics of national and racial power inequities, the extent to which new cosmopolitanism should distance itself from its perceived Enlightenment traditions is where the contention lies. Indeed, being exposed to the debates and contentions surrounding nationhood and witnessing the very real effects of international conflict and violence in the turn of the century, I find it impossible to return to the sort of optimism that Nussbaum exhibits. The notion that the world could readily become a polis and that humanity might be re-grouped into a worldwide democracy appears to be, in the words of Craig Calhoun, an “attractive but very elusive ideal” (2007: 11).

15 I do not endorse this view of Kantian cosmopolitanism as a highly monolithic and purposefully Eurocentric version. There are many debates both defending as well as critiquing Kant on this point. See Pauline Klingeild in “Six Varieties of Cosmopolitanism in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany” from Journal of the History of Ideas, 60 (July).
Calhoun identifies 9/11 as the juncture when the pro-globalist fever of the 1990’s experienced a definite turn toward the pessimistic. For most of the 1990’s, universal-humanist cosmopolitans such as Nussbaum advocated hybridity and multiple overlapping political identities, adopting neoliberalism’s contempt for strong politics of identity or group solidarities – especially “harbouring a contempt for states which they understood mainly as authoritarian and dangerous” (Calhoun, 2007: 13). 9/11 and the War in Iraq therefore came about as a shock to the hopeful sensitivities of these cosmopolitan idealists. Religious fundamentalism was matched with conservative nationalist rhetoric from the U.S. which served to divide the world into “us/them” polarities. The use of racial profiling in the United States as a legitimate weapon to protect the security of the homeland is one example where national and racial boundaries are redrawn and meticulously policed.16 E. San Juan Jr. agrees,

The undeclared state of war has resurrected not only the nation-state that postcolonialists taught us was obsolescent if not defunct; it has revived the coercive Leviathan in its current military emergency posture, with all the legal apparatus of McCarthyist surveillance, military tribunals, and new, secret ground rules of inclusion/exclusion for defining national subjecthood. (2007: 1-2)

Evidently, the strenuous policing of the borders of race, religion, and nation, and the subsequent tribalism in the politics of identity making serve as a reminder of the frictions between group solidarities which taint the 1990’s optimistic notions of a global world and certainly make an optimistic notion of world citizenship hard to imagine.

16 “Racial profiling is defined as any police-initiated action that relies on race, ethnicity, or national origin rather than the behavior of an individual or information that leads police to a particular individual who has been identified as being or having engaged in criminal activity.” (Pampel, 2004:5). See “Civil Liberties after 9/11” (2002) published by The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) (http://www.aclu.org/FilesPDFs/911_report.pdf). The ACLU filed five civil rights law-suits against American airlines companies for refusing five men of Arab descent onto their flights without justification.
Indeed, the premise that globalization should naturally lead to a global humanist sense of belonging is flawed. Globalization may promote flows and crossings across border but that does not automatically mean that nation-states are becoming defunct. Many would claim otherwise, arguing that the sense of dislocation and de-centering that has resulted from globalization has led people to cluster around the primary identities of religion, ethnicity and nationality (Kennedy, 2001: 14). Globalization has arguably undermined the stability of belonging that had once defined most people’s lives, encouraging a backlash and a “revival of nationalist, ethnic, and linguistic particularities as a way both of re-asserting difference and of re-discovering a lost sense of identity” (Kennedy, 2001: 15). It is therefore hard to claim that particularistic solidarities such as nationalism are about to go away. Nor should we wish for its demise. It is problematic to assume that nationalism is regressive and cosmopolitanism is inherently progressive. Although Nussbaum and others of the Stoic tradition are right to argue that deep-seated solidarities and closed-group exclusivities are the root of prejudice and conflict, they underestimate the importance of nationalism in organizing and benefiting human lives in the contemporary world.

In *Nations Matter*, Craig Calhoun identifies the nation-state as “the framework in which the modern era produced history’s most enduring and successful experiments in large-scale democracy” (2007: 4). Nationalism worked hand in hand with the rise of democracy – developing as a result of greater political involvement and a growing awareness of a sense of solidarity among the masses. Calhoun describes how nationalism was necessary to the formation of collective democracy, providing a basis for people to speak as a collective group (2007: 149). Likewise, democracy promoted the formation of
national solidarities through the identity forming struggles for change and the formation of “a democratic public sphere [that] spanned class, regional, religious, and other divisions [which] strengthened national solidarity” (2007: 149). Imagining a worldwide democracy without the solidarity of nation-states lacks an understanding of how social politics operates in reality. Nation-states also represent and protect the interests of their citizens when uneven globalization means the exploitation of less developed groups. Belonging to a nation-state and having clear rights within a nation-state then becomes more, rather than less important (Calhoun, 2007: 4).

Universal-humanist forms of cosmopolitanism, however attractive in their visions of a global polis, do not acknowledge the realities of an unequal world where nationality, ethnicity, and other solidarities remain important to people. In doing so, they risk foregrounding abstract idealisms over and above actually existing realities. We have to accept that nationalism and national solidarity is, and will most likely remain, a defining aspect of identity and world structure. Even if we wish for a more cosmopolitan world order, we should consider nationalism with all seriousness, taking into careful consideration how deeply it is involved in our conceptual frameworks. Though the notion of a universal community of human beings is seductive in its promises of world peace, we have to admit that no one lives outside of solidarities.

Furthermore, the utopia of a global polis and a so-called “universal humanity” in which universal-idealists indulge is itself problematic. It is worth dwelling on E. San Juan Junior’s book, In the Wake of Terror (2007) to further explore this idea. Though he mainly critiques the pluralist notions of multiculturalism in the United States, some lessons on the dangers of dismantling nation-states in favour of the universal can be
drawn from his writing. San Juan argues that American “multiculturalism” threatens to force diverse groups into an agreement with the unspoken yet unambiguous rules of the American majoritarian position – one dictated by the intertwined politics of class, race, and capitalism (13).

The self-arrogating universal swallows the unsuspecting particulars in a grand hegemonic compromise…multiculturalism celebrate[s] in order to fossilize differences and thus assimilate others into a fictive gathering which flattens contradictions pivoting around the axis of class…hid[ing] or ignor[ing] structural inequalities. (San Juan, 2007: 13)

American multiculturalism, he argues, is a political tool sustaining a “universal” American system – a hegemonic racial polity whereby “white supremacy [is maintained]…as a political system in itself” (2007: 3). This risk is inherent in old cosmopolitanism’s notion of a universal “global polis” as well. When universal-humanists speak of a universal humanity or a worldwide community built on universal human values, it is never clear whose values these “universal human” ones are built on. They neglect to address the politics behind these so-called overarching human ethics – their cultural origins, whom they really benefit, and if they represent the values of all social groups, or only the ones with greater powers of representation. For San Juan, the culture of capitalism in the U.S. exists as unquestioned and universal precisely because it protects those who already possess power and capital – primarily the White middle and upper classes; whilst the reality of social differences, structural prejudice, and economic

17 This system is upheld by the values of capitalism in which structural and institutional inequalities are hidden by illusions of equal opportunity and the freedom of consumption. Critiquing the failure of pluralism, San Juan demands a return to a school of thought which pays attention to historical rootedness and structural inequalities in our national and global institutions.

18 Due to limitations in the scope of this project, I will only address the most problematic and possibly reductive form in which the idea of “humanism” is traditionally understood. Humanism has since come under scrutiny particularly with post-structuralist criticism. Consider Martha Nussbaum’s “Human Functioning and Social Justice” (1992) for a debate on the viability of more critically rigorous understandings of “humanism”.

inequalities are institutionalized according to racial divisions of labour (2007: 14). If we were to speak of a global polis run by universal humanist ethics, we risk making the same mistake when parading an ideology which is the product of a particular culture, as a “universal” value. This, of course, goes against the very meaning of cosmopolitanism.

Certainly the ethics which Nussbaum highlight such as respect, love, and justice for all people are indisputable, and it is all very well for us to dream of such utopias. However, the exact mechanics and particularities of how this might be actualized is where the problem lies. To put in practice a world system for Nussbaum and Kant’s moral community of all human beings to exist requires a level of maturity and unselfishness that humanity has yet to attain.

Yet, there is a certain ring of truth to Nussbaum’s ambitions. As much as we should acknowledge the reality of nation and other solidarities and the likelihood of their continued existence, we should also not dismiss a vision of an ideal future. Nussbaum is not the only theorist who believes in the cosmopolitan vision. In The Postnational Constellation, Jurgen Habermas imagines a world in which the democratic process, once embedded in liberal political culture, predisposes the nation as a necessary pre-political community for democratic order (2001: 76). This democratic culture possessed by all people then functions as “an emergency backup system for maintaining the integrity of a functionally differentiated society” (Habermas, 2001: 76). Regardless of whether they seem likely, condemning these cosmopolitan ideals means accepting a dead-end towards change. Even if we agree with Calhoun’s defence of nationalism, we must not ignore the fact that national, ethnic, and religious solidarities are often the grounds for exclusion.
and persecution. If we wish to imagine a better world, we must accept that abstractions and utopic ambition must be risked to some extent. Cosmopolitanism, by its very nature will always be a projection of the ideal.

If this were so however, a paradox arises. How might we reconcile cosmopolitanism’s responsibility toward managing nationalist truths, with its humanist aspirations – the very virtues in which the value of cosmopolitanism lie? Must cosmopolitan theory always be subjected to this philosophical dialectic? Under what rubric may well-meaning cosmopolitans then proceed? What we can do is to approach cosmopolitics with a greater level of critical awareness. If we can accept these dual aspects of cosmopolitanism – that it is an idealistic aspiration for universal humanism, even as it must acknowledge the existence of national solidarities, then we may be better equipped to think about how we might reconstruct cosmopolitan theory as a more viable form. Accepting these two intertwining philosophies, yet wishing to work out a new theory which is no longer confined by them, marks the first step in this project to re-invent cosmopolitan theory. My objective is to delineate a new concept of cosmopolitanism which does not only surmount its dialectic tug of war, but is able to account for cosmopolitanism’s responsibility toward both nationalism, and the imaginings of a global community. In the words of cosmopolitan partisan Pheng Cheah, “In the face of this historical impasse, where neither post-Enlightenment universalism nor nationalist communitarianism is a viable ideological-institutional vehicle for freedom, cosmopolitanism as a philosophical ideal is up for modest reinvention” (1998: 290).
1.2 Discursive Cosmopolitanism: The Ever-Receding Goal

Perhaps we should begin by rescuing the cosmopolitan term from its too rigid association with universalism – the aspect of the cosmopolitanism tradition which most new cosmopolitans have difficulty accepting. Appiah makes a crucial distinction between cosmopolitanism and universal humanism in “Cosmopolitan Patriots;”

It would be wrong…to conflate cosmopolitanism and humanism, because cosmopolitanism is not just the feeling that everybody matters. The cosmopolitan celebrates the fact that there are different local human ways of being, whereas humanism is consistent with the desire for global homogeneity. Humanism can be made compatible with cosmopolitan sentiments, but it can also live with a deadening urge to uniformity. (1998: 94)

The sentiments of universal humanism, whilst desirable and intrinsically part of the cosmopolitan ethic, must not become the over-riding point to cosmopolitanism. Thus, cosmopolitanism must not be about attaining universal humanism, it must not succeed in reaching it, lest it inevitably result in a dangerous homogenization of the sort discussed in Section 1.1. Although the universal humanist ideal is what drives the cosmopolitan dream, it must never be achieved or it paradoxically compromises the very existence of what it means to be cosmopolitan. This is a significant point which lies at the crux of my argument. Real cosmopolitanism does not and cannot exist as an endpoint – at some imaginary place and time when we can sit back and say that we have reached a so-called global human understanding, because true universal terms of understanding of this nature do not exist. Real cosmopolitanism exists as an in between, as a process of discursive negotiation and ambition, always reaching for a humanist ideal but never attaining it, and therefore legitimizing its moral existence. When we look at cosmopolitanism in this way, it becomes clear that we are dealing with an unstable process, a process which must
necessarily be unstable and unresolved in order for it to function at its fullest integrity.

Let me draw upon Judith Butler’s observation on the paradox of the universal in “For a Careful Reading”.

The problem emerges… that what one means by the ‘the universal’ will vary, and the cultural articulation of that term in its various modalities will work against precisely the trans-cultural status of the claim. (Butler, 1995: 129)

Whilst in one culture, certain values may be considered universally ethical; this may not be so for another cultural group, thus undercutting the very meaning of the universal. Being such a contested term therefore, what one may consider as universal humanist-cosmopolitan values can only ever be partially articulated. To articulate it more fully would be to jeopardize the ethics of cosmopolitanism itself – a respect for all cultural diversity. Quarrelling about the end effect of cosmopolitanism, whether a universal global polis or a world of rooted nationalist solidarities, hence misses the very point of the cosmopolitan effort. Cosmopolitanism is a labour of translation; it is a discursive process of negotiating among rooted solidarities, humanist dreams, and other such positions. It is comfortable with this discursive existence, because that is what being cosmopolitan is – allowing for diverse solidarities and identities to co-exist with a longing for a humanist world, but never choosing one over the other indefinitely, never achieving the ideals to which it owes its existence. As Butler describes,

The task that cultural difference sets for us is the articulation of universality through a difficult labour of translation, one in which the terms made to stand for one another are transformed in the process, and where the movement of that unanticipated transformation establishes the universal as that which is yet to be achieved and which, in order to resist domestication, may never be fully or finally achievable. (1995: 131)

This discursivity and notion of process, this so-called “Discursive Cosmopolitanism,” offers a new way of thinking about cosmopolitan ethics. Undoubtedly it offers a way
forward beyond the dead-end quarrels between universal humanism and rooted nationalism which has plagued cosmopolitics of the '90s. This process is a productive one because it instills a self-critical open-endedness towards particular cultural solidarities as well as towards larger universal-humanist ideals.

1.3 Discursive Cosmopolitanism in Hyperlink Cinema

Having outlined my version of a new discursive cosmopolitan theory, it is now time to relate all this back to cinema and the post-9/11 Hollywood ensemble film. I begin with a comment made by Dr. Felicia Chan from the University of Manchester at a seminar on cities and cosmopolitan cultures held at the National University of Singapore on 12 May 2008. Chan observed that contemporary film studies places too much emphasis on neoformalism and industry research; too many people are looking at the technologically determined aspects of cinema such as style, cinematography, and auteurism at the expense of reading film in terms of their socio-political impetus. If one were inclined to do so, this often involves resorting to an uncomfortable marriage with social theory which has to be reconfigured to apply to the language of cinema. In such cases, theorists then tend to ignore the stylistic, technical, and production elements of cinema and were wont to read the film only at the level of a thematic text. Chan comments that film theory has so far not provided a truly comprehensive way of reading the cinematic apparatus hand in hand with its socio-political significance.
With regards to the field of cosmopolitanism, the discipline hardly provides a language or framework with which to think about cinema as a site of contestation for global ethics and philosophies. The closest thing to a reading of international social politics in cinema so far, is the various postcolonial readings of cinematic texts, and more recently, some dubious and problematic ventures into transnational cinema which I have discussed in the introduction. Attempts at reading cinema cosmopolitically have also been limited to the studies of various international collaborations and how they have made international productions more accessible to worldwide audiences. Sean Cubitt, for instance, in “Cosmopolitan Film” uses the term “cosmopolitan cinema” to describe worldwide appeal and an international audience (*The Cinema Effect*, 2004: 336). Although he describes the importance of maintaining the cosmopolitan ethic (338) this is only done is passing. Cubitt analyses *The Matrix* (1999) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2003) in terms of how they manipulate the cinematic spectacle in order to appeal to universal audiences. Though insightful, Cubitt’s take on the term “cosmopolitan” is somewhat limiting. It addresses an international audience-market, rather than an ongoing, complex ethical project. It ignores the potential for the “cosmopolitan” to extend beyond the general terminological abstractions and enter an active ethical realm.

As we have seen, the term “cosmopolitan” extends beyond purely international interaction. When speaking of cosmopolitan cinema, attention must be paid to the ethics and ideologies within the text. This is especially pertinent when a rise in the number of films which deal with topics of global humanism, international politics and violence, call for a reading of cinema in terms of its social politics. I suggest that we think about
cinema in terms of its cosmopolitics and observe how certain films struggle thematically with the dialectics of global humanism and rooted solidarities – and if/how they attempt to work out a discursive cosmopolitan position. I will look at how cosmopolitics affects elements of cinematic style and structure, as well as aspects of their production in the Hollywood film industry. Hence, I propose an integrated study of cosmopolitics in the cinema, looking at aspects of style, production, industry, as well as text and political themes. In particular, I address the significance of the ensemble narrative structure as a cinematic technique that embodies the ethics of cosmopolitanism.

As my analysis of the films over the next few chapters will demonstrate, the ensemble narrative form allows for the articulation of two important facets of the discursive cosmopolitan ethic – firstly, the presentation of multiple points of view, and secondly, the idea that these different perspectives are connected by a larger, common link. A well-structured ensemble film, claims screenwriter Linda Cowgill, should end up with an intelligible whole unified by “a synthesis of thematic ideas and plot movement” even though a filmmaker follows different protagonists across multiple, non-linear narratives (1999: 124). The pleasure derived from watching the ensemble film involves a sense of satisfaction when this “bigger picture” emerges, weaving each story into a seamless tapestry via “a clear issue or theme, a common context in which the characters relate, and an event which frames the story” (1999: 125). It is also possible to include in this list, a philosophy or ethical arrangement that unifies the various plot lines under an ideological system. In the films I look at, the ethic of humanist-cosmopolitanism acts as a unifying factor tying together various stories through the audience’s understanding of a cosmopolitan vision. When links are made between different characters, we get a sense
that despite their differences, everyone is connected in larger, almost sublime ways. Hence, the ensemble structure appeals to the universal-humanist ambitions of the cosmopolitan dream. It presents different, multiple narrators, with multiple world-views, but at the same time, structurally links all of them.

This connection however, is not concrete but exists only within the imagined cinematic space. The juxtaposition of narratives also has equal potential to contrast as much as connect characters. The ensemble or hyperlink structure itself thus embodies the very complex nature of the discursive cosmopolitan ethic. Recurrent in *Crash, Letters from Iwo Jima, Syriana*, and *Babel*, the ensemble narrative is a significant feature of the cosmopolitan text that will be discussed in each of the chapters.

With our new understanding of cosmopolitanism as a discursive process, one would therefore define a “discursively cosmopolitan” film as a text that “keep[s] in single focus at all times both a universalist insight that nationalists tend to deny, and a nationalist insight that universalists tend to deny” (Hollinger 2002: 230). It is able to acknowledge the realities of rooted, complex social identities but at the same time, keep reaching for the ideal of a global community. And as Butler has argued, this universal humanist condition must never be achieved, and therefore never be fully articulated in the discursive cosmopolitan text. With this important definition of cosmopolitan cinema in mind, I now turn to how these films actually negotiate the contesting ideologies of global humanism and of belonging to particular solidarities of nation and ethnicity. How might a cinematic text practice discursive cosmopolitanism? How would the cinematic apparatus express this ethic? Why are certain films of the genre better able to demonstrate this concept of cosmopolitanism as a never-ending process, whilst others problematically fall
into either the universal-humanist, or the national-realist polemic? These questions are addressed in the upcoming chapters.

I examine one of four primary films – *Crash*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *Syriana*, and *Babel* – in each chapter. Arranged in a spectrum from the least to the most exemplary of discursive cosmopolitan cinema, each chapter builds upon the previous one in working closer toward representing the ideal cosmopolitan text. In the next two chapters I look at two films which fail to maintain this continuous discursivity. In *Crash*, reaching for a comfortable universalism results in an oversimplified humanist aesthetic which ignores the complex structural and institutionalized nature of racism. In *Letters*, culturally specific tropes and images located within the American cinematic tradition are paraded as universal ones. Both films use the ensemble structure to create the illusion of considered multi-perspective worldliness, a façade which obscures problematic ideologies which defy the cosmopolitan purpose. Despite their good intentions, these films claim to have grasped the universal and in doing so, fail to maintain that critical discursivity necessary in sustaining the cosmopolitan project. Chapter 4 then addresses how *Syriana* uses the ensemble narrative structure to present an objective and detached multi-perspectival view of current world politics. Despite its even-handedness however, the film still falls short of imagining a larger cosmopolitan dream. Chapter 5 will finally look at *Babel* to exemplify how an ideal discursive cosmopolitanism in cinema can be achieved. Most importantly, I hope to demonstrate though my reading of these films, a new way of thinking about cinema in terms of its potential towards furthering the cosmopolitan vision.
Chapter 2: Cosmopolitan Charades: Tragic Universalism in Crash

When defining a new epistemology for cinema, it is important to distinguish what it is not, in order to determine what it is. In this new framework for cosmopolitan film, I have established how true cosmopolitanism is a discursive negotiation between the universal humanist dream and the rootedness of national/cultural solidarities. The problem with some films lies with their inability to transcend either of these ideological extremes. Focusing on an analysis of Paul Haggis’s Crash, this chapter will first look at how the film uses the ensemble narrative structure to create a sense of worldly humanism. This appearance of cosmopolitanism however, is only cosmetic. Section 2.2 looks at how the film problematically attempts to capture a universal world-view and in so doing, grossly simplifies the complex issues of ethnic prejudice. Crash buries its exploration of race relations in contemporary Los Angeles amid vague universalizing sentiments. In doing so, the film falls into the very trap which the discursive cosmopolitan project must avoid.

As an L.A. centric film, Crash may not directly address the arguments outlined in Chapter 1 concerning cosmopolitanism and the debate over the continued state of nation and national solidarities. However, the film does tackle issues of ethnic and racial conflict, which for most characters arise from the interstices of migration. The movie thus aptly comments on questions of national belonging and solidarity in an age of transnational migrant flows.
2.1 Reasoning Racism though the Ensemble Narrative Structure

Paul Haggis’s *Crash* fits well within a series of ensemble films set in Los Angeles, including Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts* (1993) and Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia* (1999). Car collisions and car-jackings are motifs which link the characters in the films to each other. The film’s opening and closing car-crash sequences frame the multiple narratives within the film. The car crashes are metaphors for the cultural clashes that happen in Los Angeles. They draw a cognitive map of Los Angeles by creating a sense of connectedness through the several collisions, hit-and-runs, and car jackings that involve all the different characters all over the metropolis.

Hsuan L. Hsu’s article on *Crash* draws briefly on Frederick Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping (2006: 138) to describe how the film’s ensemble structure provides spectators with a way of picturing Los Angeles. Jameson describes an abstract disorientation arising in the era of late capitalism whereby the rooted human mind is incapable of mapping the “great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (Hsu, 2006: 138). Los Angeles, as a decentered metropolis at the confluence of information and immigrant flows, presents precisely this anxiety. The appeal of the ensemble structure in *Crash* is that it encourages spectators to identify with the role of the objective, all-seeing camera (rather than having a limited sympathy with one character). This promises an easy, pacifist solution for mapping racism onto Los Angeles’s social space – by witnessing

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19 Jameson borrows the term “cognitive mapping” from urban geographer Kevin Lynch who, in *The Image of the City*, describes how urban sprawls and large cities have become too disorienting for its inhabitants to mentally grasp and fully navigate. Jameson extrapolates Lynch’s spatial analysis to the realm of social structure – “to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale” (1988: 283).
everyone’s story we see that everyone has their reasons for racial antagonism. This universal-humanist mantra operates as the central theme unifying the various stories within a larger narrative of racism and the need for forgiveness and redemption.

*Crash* uses the ensemble narrative structure to establish this over-riding worldview. Through a network of stories, we see the multiple aspects of each character in order to understand why he/she acts out in racist ways. In Christine’s story, Officer Ryan is a racist cop who sexually abuses her for no other reason than to traumatize black people. When the story shifts to Officer Ryan’s narrative however, audiences realize the reasons behind his prejudices. Ryan’s father lost his business after affirmative action initiatives preferentially granted government contracts to black-owned businesses. His father also suffers from prostrate cancer but an African-American Health Maintenance Organization officer refuses to let him consult a non-HMO physician for a new diagnosis. The multiple narrative structure allows audiences to see things from Ryan’s point-of-view and gain insight into his situation. Although his reasons do not justify his treatment of Christine, they explain Ryan’s racism by suggesting that he too, is a victim of the system. In this way, Haggis uses the ensemble structure to bestow the various characters in the film with a sense of humanity’s vulnerability.

Redemption itself becomes the unifying solution for nearly all the characters. For instance, the bigoted Officer Ryan redeems his racist misbehaviors when he later rescues Christine from a car crash. During the rescue scene, the film stylistically depicts Ryan’s redemption and his (re-)instatement within the image of a hero. As Christine is dragged

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20 Local affirmative action policies take gender, race, or ethnicity into account in an attempt to promote equal opportunity within areas such as employment, education, and health programs.
away by medics, the camera cuts to a shot of Ryan kneeling on the ground. The shot of Ryan is from a low-angle and is in slow motion, creating a sense of noble majesty. Ambient noise is cut off, leaving only the haunting music on the soundtrack. The scene, hazy from the smoke of the fire, is shot in soft-focus such that Ryan glows as if in a halo. Positioned in front of a fire-engine, he draws upon the familiar image of the noble fire-fighter/rescue-worker which post-9/11 America adores. With a single shot, Haggis redeems Ryan for all his misdeeds, re-instating him as a heroic figure. The film suggests that racist anger and prejudice can be overcome in a climactic moment of redemption.

The central theme in Crash is that despite having racist prejudices, everyone is human and is worthy of forgiveness. The pacifist fantasy of forgiveness and redemption unites all the stories within the ensemble structure under Linda Cowgill’s notion of a central “core” or “bigger picture.” The ensemble or hyperlink form lends a certain thematic and philosophical cohesion to the film – an intellectual credibility which makes Crash appear to be an insightful and progressive analysis on race issues. Such a reading of the film however, is highly problematic. In the next section, I address how Crash’s presentation of the theme of redemption and pacifist humanism as a universal world-view actually goes against the values of discursive cosmopolitanism.

2.2 Well-meaning Universalisms: Dangers and Consequences

The issue here lies primarily with the way in which Crash presents both the problem of race, and its solution. The theme of human redemption in Crash appeals to an
imagined universal solution to racism. It operates on the principle that although racism is bad, everyone has their reasons for prejudice and even those guilty of racism are capable of redeeming acts. We can simply rising above our racist compunctions. Such a sweeping observation however, ends up sounding rather oversimplified and thin. The film thematically embraces the abstracts of ideal humanism, whilst overriding the fact that racism is also historically rooted and is perpetuated through concrete social structures and institutions. Crash buries its exploration of race relations amid vague, well-meaning humanist sentiments. On the surface, this pacifist perspective on racism may appear to exhibit a benevolent understanding of the foibles of humanity. However, such blindness to the realities of racial prejudice, which are significantly more complex and structurally embedded than simply being an unfortunate matter of personal perspective, sustains rather than absolves the race problems the film tries to address. This of course contradicts the cosmopolitan facade which the film strives to project. As I have described in Chapter 1, a truly cosmopolitan text is able to envision a larger humanism whilst never departing from the acknowledgement of rooted cultural and national particularities. In the case of Crash, this should involve an acknowledgment that racism is too historically and structurally bound to be dismissed by such abstract, pacifist generalizations.

One particular scene demonstrates this point. Anthony and Peter Waters, two young black men, saunter down a wealthy L.A. boulevard. Anthony is complaining about racial prejudice and the poor service he receives on account of being black. On seeing them, Jean Cabot, the archetypal paranoid WASP housewife, shudders and draws closer to her husband. Anthony comments, “…this white woman sees two black guys, who look like UCLA students, strolling down the sidewalk and her reaction is blind fear... In fact, if
anybody should be scared, it’s us…So why aren’t we scared?” Peter replies, “Because we have guns?” The two suddenly whip out their pistols and proceed to threaten the Cabots into handing over their car. In doing so, they conform to the racist stereotype of young black men. The film does not dispute the stereotype of the African American thug, but attempts to attribute the motivation of carjackers such as Anthony and Peter to being snubbed by society. If black people were not discriminated against, goes Crash’s logic, they would not feel the compunction to be deviant. No mention at all is made of the specific economic and structural disadvantages faced by minority groups in reality. The film simplifies racism and race related issues to a matter of prejudice and personal frustration.

Conversely, it excuses and forgives racism on the premise that even perpetrators of racist acts have their reasons and are capable of redemption. As discussed, Officer Ryan’s sexual misconduct towards Christine is forgiven after he rescues her from her overturned car. His racist belittlement of Shaniqa in a dispute over his father’s HMO plan is justified by the fact that he cannot claim medical treatment for his sick father. Inane as it sounds, the film seems to be saying that people are both good and bad, and that even racist feelings are justified. Crash forces us to “see” race by bringing the issue of corporeal difference to the foreground, but after doing so, it does not offer any real insight beyond these platitudes. It instead disguises rooted systemic problems beneath the illusion that seeing race is simply a fickle issue of choice.

There is no doubt that this well-meaning film attempts to offer a genuine resolution to difficult racial issues with its themes of redemption and equality. Despite its problems, Crash does admittedly try to work towards addressing social problems in a
drama that forces audiences to acknowledge ongoing issues on race. It frames these problems in a pacifist manner, encouraging us audiences to understand that racial prejudice is a fact of the human condition, a common flaw which deserves forgiveness. However, such good intentions are hard to appreciate if, in doing so, one deliberately ignores or disavows the real institutionalization of racism in history, economics and infrastructure. Even if structural injustices are noted, such as the affirmative action policy which puts Officer Ryan’s father out of business, these observations are only made in passing. Such an oversight becomes especially problematic when the film itself is marketed as a liberal, social critique which promises genuine insight into the “real” problems of racism, and yet fails to do so.

Judging from the responses and reviews of the film, Crash appears to have succeeded in marketing itself as an insightful political drama. Haggis’s debut feature was very well-reviewed at its release, unexpectedly winning the Best Picture Academy Award in 2006. With studios avoiding race issues since 9/11, Crash kick-started the trend for a new brand of politically sensitive dramas. Ella Taylor of Los Angeles Weekly hailed it as "one of the best Hollywood movies about race" (http://www.laweekly.com/2005-05-05/film-tv/space-race). Steve Davis of The Austin Chronicle calls Crash “the most compelling American movie to come around in a long, long time” (http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Calendar/Film).

Crash creates the illusion of gritty authenticity and credibility because of its clever manipulation of select stylistic forms and aesthetics traditionally associated with “art films” or “serious socio-political dramas.” As Sicinski points out, Haggis uses handheld camera work, grainy filmstock, and a blue and orange tinted colour scheme
which is reminiscent of American “Indiewood” cinema (2005: 52). This cinematic aesthetic lends credibility to the film, giving it a sense of urban “realism.” That the film is set in L.A., the scene of the Rodney King uprising in 1992, adds to its sense of history and political significance. Crash is clearly presented as a liberalist artistic commentary on the real problems of racism but embracing this reading of Crash raises problematic implications. Rather than offering an honest criticism of structural and economic racial inequalities in the U.S., Crash sells out to an idealized vision of a liberal America which American audiences wish to preserve. It writes racism off as a bad personal habit, or an inevitable human temperament to be tolerated, rather than a violent and systematic historical persecution which is still part of America’s social and economic structure. As Michael Sicinski points out in his review of Crash,

The lie that serves as Crash’s esthetic and political domination is the one that ensures its success with liberal audiences: the individualist ideology that pretends all races are created equal, and that as individuals we can simply opt out of racism, as though it were a set of ideas and not a set of historically aggregated material structures and institutional practices. (2005: 52)

Crash’s “blinkered assumptions about American liberalism” (Sicinski, 2005: 52), no matter how well-intentioned, occlude the historical and structural roots of inequality. It is easier to diagnose racism as a universal human foible that the vague virtues of love and empathy would overcome, than a real and persistent problem in American society. The film was well-received because it successfully appealed to an American audience eager to see itself as “liberal” and “cosmopolitanism” despite glaring injustices within the system that continue to persist (Bellah, 2003: 19). This goes against the very notion of the cosmopolitan project which emphasizes honest self-criticism in order to work towards its ideal of an equal humanity.
To think of *Crash* as a liberal cosmopolitan drama giving real insight into racism is thus very problematic. It allows for the film’s conservative platitudes on universal human nature, to stand in for real engagement with the issues of racism. *Crash* therefore cannot be considered a discursive cosmopolitan text. In trying to capture a universal solution or understanding of racism, it forgets the rooted nature of racial solidarities. In going towards one extreme of the cosmopolitical debate, *Crash* does not sufficiently address the other.

This impulse towards attempting to capture the universal human condition also becomes a problem in Clint Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The next chapter addresses how the articulation of so-called universal human values in *Letters* in fact disguises culturally rooted ideologies.
I have demonstrated how *Crash* presents an appearance of being a liberal, pluralist text despite having conservative and over-simplified themes. Clint Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Flags of our Fathers* risk the same criticism. As an American production, *Letters* appears to be a generous representation of the Japanese during World War II. As we shall see however, despite its apparently Japanese-centered perspective, *Letters* espouses specific American cultural values that are represented on-screen via a longstanding Hollywood tradition. It disguises American-oriented understandings of nationalism and patriotism as culturally universal. This becomes problematic especially when the film is marketed as “cosmopolitan” cinema – bearing grim consequences for our continued understanding of cinema, cosmopolitanism, and culture.

This chapter examines the responsibilities and ethical weight that surround the term “cosmopolitan.” It also looks into the consequences of misrepresenting the cosmopolitan in relation to the particular ideological anxieties of the film. I first explore how *Letters* and *Flags*, when viewed together, appear to fulfill Kant’s vision for a cosmopolitan philosophy which acknowledges multiple points of view. Section 3.2 then interrogates the film’s cosmetic appearance of cosmopolitan liberalism, revealing how specifically American cinematic tropes and representations of Japanese heroism and patriotism are passed off as universal ideologies.
3.1 Exploring Marginalised Narratives

Shot as a complementary film to *Flags of Our Fathers, Letters from Iwo Jima* explores the marginalized Japanese narrative of the battle at Iwo Jima, a perspective largely sidelined in mainstream U.S. accounts of WWII. *Letters* and *Flags* seek to present more than one point of view of a political event. Though not strictly a cross-cultural ensemble narrative in themselves, both films, if viewed together, ultimately serve the same function as other cosmopolitan ensemble films – to present multiple and diverse perspectives. Eastwood attempts to represent both narratives with equal credit and legitimacy, detracting from neither whilst putting forth a general observation of shared human suffering and brotherhood amid the cruelties of war.\(^\text{21}\)

This is particularly evident in two specific scenes where Eastwood repeats the same key shots in both films, but from opposite perspectives and to very different effects. The first such instance is an extreme long distance establishing shot of the American fleet advancing upon the shores of Iwo Jima. This is a visually spectacular shot – the camera, positioned at a high vantage point, captures a huge battalion of approaching warships across the horizon as warplanes circle above. The same shot evokes different responses from the spectators of each film. In *Flags*, which details the American perspective of the battle, this image evokes a sense of hope and triumph in the strength of the U.S. forces. In *Letters* however, the same shot provokes fear and trepidation. The audience is aware of the island’s poor defences and the Japanese troops’ vulnerability; this shot evokes feelings of dread on behalf of the film’s Japanese protagonists.

\(^{21}\) However, seeing these two films as parts of a whole can be problematic and is discussed in Chapter 4.
Eastwood repeats this technique more effectively in scenes of the battle itself when U.S. Marines advance on ambush set by Japanese defenders who lie in wait in their pillbox bunkers. The scene cuts to a shot taken from behind the gun slots of these pillboxes, presumably from the point-of-view of a Japanese soldier concealed behind the wall. The camera watches as the U.S. soldiers creep forward through the underbrush, approaching the bunker. In *Flags*, this shot creates a sense of great unease and dread when we realize the marines are being watched and are walking into an ambush. The sudden dislocation of the camera’s perspective from the point of view of the U.S. marines to this unknown watcher is destabilizing and creates a heightened anxiety. In *Letters* however, this same shot instead creates anticipation because the disadvantaged Japanese soldiers might gain the badly needed advantage of a surprise attack. Repeating the same key shots in both films but for different effects highlights how shared moments can be interpreted very differently when seen through different perspectives. Doing so proves the point that both sides of the story, though entirely different, are equally real and legitimate.

Eastwood particularly avoids an easy dismissal of the Japanese perspective of WWII. Where most other Hollywood war films barely acknowledge the Japanese perspective of the war, let alone discuss the accounts of Japanese soldiers with any sympathy, *Letters* is committed towards an empathetic exploration of this marginalized point of view. For instance, the characters of Saigo and General Kurabayashi are explored with moving depth and dignity. We are given touching insights into Saigo’s life back on mainland Japan. A simple baker, he has to leave his pregnant wife behind to manage the shop on her own. The three dimensional characters in the film depart from
the almost inhuman representations of the Japanese in earlier war films, such as Frank Capra’s *Know Your Enemy Japan* (1945) which depicts the Japanese as faceless, inhuman hordes. Even in more recent productions such as Michael Bay’s *Pearl Harbour* (2001), screen time spent on the Japanese suicide air bombers were cursory at best. *Letters* provides a version of WWII from a perspective not commonly seen in mainstream American media.

Beyond just exploring these alternative perspectives however, Eastwood also directs *Flags* and *Letters* toward fulfilling a larger cosmopolitan theme. Whilst he depicts the differences in perspectives between these war-time enemies, he also peppers the films with moments of shared human experiences of loyalty, camaraderie and suffering. In doing so, he draws attention toward an idea of a larger common humanity. For instance, in *Letters*, the Japanese soldiers treat Sam, a wounded American marine from Oklahoma. Commander Nishi shares a tentative friendship with him, discovering they have a lot in common despite their cultural differences and their wartime enmity. When Sam dies, Nishi reads out a letter from Sam’s mother. The letter is a touching piece, detailing the intimacies of Sam’s home life and revealing a human dimension to the American enemy. Shimizu, a soldier and ex-Kempetai remarks, “I don’t know anything about our enemy… I was taught that they were savages, but that American soldier, his mother’s words were the same as my mothers.” There is a clear attempt here to highlight the notion of a shared humanity and to draw attention to the universality of human emotions such as motherly love and love for family.

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At the same time however, Eastwood avoids ignoring or excusing the violence of war whilst depicting this larger humanism. Shimizu, convinced of the humanity and compassion of the Americans after hearing Sam’s letter being read out, chooses to surrender. In a brutal breach of honour and the codes of the battlefield however, the defenceless Shimizu is shot at point blank by his captors. This brutal murder is reminiscent of an earlier scene in which Japanese soldiers mechanically stab a marine to death after he falls into the tunnels beneath Surabachi. Even as Eastwood depicts moments of shared human compassion and understanding between these two enemies, he also presents acts of great brutality from both parties. Eastwood juxtaposes the intimate stories of individual soldiers with the atrocities of war. This is clearly a comment on human nature and the capacity of human behavior to commit the most extreme deeds. Monstrosity, these films seem to claim, lies not with individual soldiers, but with war itself. No culture or nationality is inherently cruel; it is war which brings out the worst in humanity.

Hence, Clint Eastwood’s films appear to further the cosmopolitan ethic in two ways – by representing the point of view of both parties, particularly the marginalized Japanese narrative, and by attributing the horrors on the battlefield to war itself, and not the particularities of culture. In doing so, he encourages the audience to look beyond particular stereotypes, particularly of the Japanese, to realize the universal human capacity for both compassion and cruelty.

In this way, *Letters* comes closer to our definition of new cosmopolitan cinema in that it is able to deal specifically with rooted Japanese and American identities, histories
and narratives even whilst trying to imagine a common humanity. It does not, like *Crash*, write off inter-cultural enmity to simply being a result of common human foibles that can be exorcised by mere forgiveness. The scene noted above in which Nishi shares a moment of cross-cultural understanding with Sam, lasts mere moments. Just as he places the letter back in Sam’s pocket, a blast goes off outside and the Japanese soldiers go back to killing American soldiers and vice-versa. That brief inter-cultural connection is lost amid the immediacy of the war. Even though *Letters* recognizes a shared humanity and laments the cruelties of war, this shared humanity does not become the “solution” to the conflict, as it does in *Crash*.

This does not mean however, that *Letters* is unproblematic. Indeed, as the next section will discuss, *Letters* occupies a problematic position within the spectrum of discursive cosmopolitan cinema which I establish. A closer look at the cinematic styles and tropes within the film reveal how these apparently “universal” depictions of heroism, patriotism and masculinity are instead highly culturally specific. Before offering an analysis of the film, I first discuss what is at risk when films present a “cosmetic” cosmopolitanism without embodying the real ethics of a discursive cosmopolitan text.

3.2 Discovering The American Cinematic Tradition in *Letters from Iwo Jima*

I have previously addressed the significance of the ethical responsibility and political gravity inherent in the term “cosmopolitan.” It involves an ideological transcendence of national boundaries in an active movement towards the global, whilst paradoxically maintaining an affiliation toward local/national histories and narratives (Dirlik, 1996: 26).
As a term which occupies the ever-shifting position between the local and the global, the cosmopolitan ideally contains a subtext of social heterogeneity and a preference for plural nationalisms and inter-national narratives. This dedication to the ethical principal of both universal humanism and diverse solidarities marks the very meaning of the discursive cosmopolitan text.

The problem arises however when this powerful term, rooted in vague and abstract ethical ideals, is applied indiscriminately and without sufficient attention to its ethical and philosophical implications. Doing so risks its decline into mere jargon – a phenomenon which has marked many other attempts to conceptualize globalization, diaspora, and global culture flows (Sklair, 2008: 93). To avoid losing the significance and meaning of the term, it is critical to situate the “cosmopolitan” firmly within an optic which constantly keeps the ethics of cosmopolitanism discursivity in focus. Only then would a text encapsulate the very meaning of the cosmopolitan project. Though Letters is marketed as a liberal, transnational, and pluralist social drama, it in fact falls short of espousing true cosmopolitan ideals. Deeper analysis reveals rather conservative and culture-centric ideologies which undermine its claims to cosmopolitanism.

An account of the battle of Iwo Jima from the Japanese perspective, Letters has been commended as a “brave”23 film transcending Hollywood’s traditional cultural centricism by virtue of being a cross-national, foreign language production. Letters

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23 Critics applaud Letters from Iwo Jima as a “brave” (Rose Anthony, Hollywood Report Card) (http://rossanthony.com/L/lettersfromiwojima.shtml) and honest film which dared cross the gap of historical enmity between America and Japan. Ken Fox of TV Guide’s Movie Guide calls the film “a significant development in the genre: No American film…ever embedded itself so deeply in the enemy camp” (http://movies.tvguide.com/letters-iwo-jima/review/284676). Letters is evidently celebrated simply for being a cross-national production as none of the reviews explored the themes and narratives within the film with much critical depth.
however is at best, a cross-national Hollywood production with unmet ambitions toward being a cosmopolitan text. The film resorts to familiar themes, cultural tropes, and film styles gleaned from popular depictions of American patriotism in Hollywood war films to represent a Japanese narrative. A comparison of *Letters* with genre-defining American World War II films, as well as with contemporary Hollywood war blockbusters such as Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and *Flags of our Fathers*, will reveal how *Letters* barely departs from the sentiments and assumptions of these deeply patriotic American war narratives.  

The American war movie is strongly rooted in World War II American history and politics. According to film historian Thomas Schatz, “never before or since have the interests of the nation and the movie industry been so closely aligned” (1998: 89) as in the World War II era. The Hollywood war film emerged virtually by government mandate after U.S. entry into the war, with President Roosevelt appointing Lowell Mellett as the head of the Bureau of Motion Pictures (Schatz, 1998: 101). With close support and scrutiny from the U.S. government, the 1940’s and ‘50s saw a steady stream of highly patriotic war films produced by Hollywood which quickly established conventions for the war movie genre that continues today.  

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24 Of course, it is dangerous to assume that Hollywood is an accurate representation of so-called “American national ideologies.” As I readily admit, such a link involves making very broad and problematic generalizations which should not be accepted without criticism. However, for the purpose of this discussion, my references to generalized notions of “American cultural assumptions,” “American ideologies,” and so forth, refer specifically to those represented by Hollywood, and are not meant to signify America in its entirety – if such a thing is even possible. The question of whether or not Hollywood represents the real America, or if American culture is shaped by popular culture, is somewhat beyond the scope of this thesis. What we are engaging with here is the ideological America, virtual or otherwise, which Hollywood imagines, interprets, and promotes.
To garner empathy and support for the American troops for instance, it became important for WWII combat films to bring American audiences close to the front lines – an agenda fulfilled via the aesthetics of realism, a defining trait of the war genre.

Preceding the surge of combat films in 1943, were the massive new advances in news coverage of the war through motion-picture newsreels and documentaries. Influenced by their reality and immediacy, Hollywood film aesthetics were driven toward capturing a sense of neo-realism through the use of similar cinematic techniques (Schatz, 1998: 91). John Ford’s *The Battle of Midday* set the standard for documentary realism and first-person combat coverage in 1943 through the use of the handheld camera and 16mm Kodachrome photography (Schatz, 1998: 121). War films have since referenced the aesthetic quality of the newsreel through the use of shaky and unstable shots with bleached and washed-out film stock. A large number of the battle scenes in *Saving Private Ryan*, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, are shot with a volatile camera. Avoiding still shots and an even editing pace during climactic fight scenes, these films juxtapose long takes with rapid edits of chaotic camera work. Both *Letters* and *Flags* share the same visual colour palette – the mud-grey grainyness often associated with war films. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Letters* stays committed to the genre’s desire for realism by combining bleached grey and washed out colour tones with a gritty, grainy texture throughout the film’s flashback battle sequence. The only times in which both films return to full colour are in the very brief scenes set in the present which open and close the narrative, framing the central flashback sequence.

In fact, the very use of the flashback to tell the battle story is a narrative device deeply entrenched in Hollywood’s representations of American nostalgia. In *Saving*
*Private Ryan* for instance, the major part of the film takes the form of a flashback to the invasion of Normandy and the quest that unfolds to bring Private Ryan home from the front lines. The opening and closing scenes are set in “the present,” in the cemetery off Omaha Beach to which James Ryan returns to pay his respects to his deceased comrades. Seen through Ryan’s memory, the use of the flashback creates a sense of nostalgia for the loyalty of U.S. soldiers who died for their mission. Being a primary dramatic device in generating feelings of nostalgia, many Hollywood war dramas relied heavily on flashbacks to relay a sense of national pride. In the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg clearly establishes the relationship between nostalgia and patriotism with images of the American flag followed by an elderly man walking by the honored graves of dead soldiers, all to the accompaniment of sombre music. Albert Auster writes, “…Speilberg touches the collective memory, evoking feelings both elegiac and patriotic” (2005: 207). Nostalgia works on the imagination of nationhood, calling upon shared national “memories” or ideologies to evoke a sense of national identity.

That nostalgia itself has become an established cinematic device in the representation of American patriotism on-screen is evident in the long line of Hollywood war films extending from *Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (John Huston, 1951) in the mid-century, to recent productions such as *Pearl Harbour* (Michael Bay, 2001). One must acknowledge the long, visible connection between the cinematic theme of nostalgia and the fostering of American national identity. When Eastwood uses the flashback to articulate nostalgia for Japanese patriotism, it inevitably carries the weight of an entire Hollywood/American cultural and national tradition.
Indeed the similarity between the manner in which both *Letters* and *Saving Private Ryan* use the flashback as a form of national memory-making cannot be ignored. *Letters* opens and closes in the year 2005 with a group of archaeologists who discover a bag of letters written by the soldiers stationed to defend the island of Iwo Jima in 1944. Like Private Ryan’s recollections at Omaha cemetery, the letters provide the threads of nostalgia which pull the narrative back into an imagined national past. At various points in the flashback, events are mediated through the words of multiple narrators whose letters the archaeologists find. Hearing the words of these dead soldiers though their letters evokes a sense of loss as the spectator is made to relive the few days preceding their deaths through the washed out, sepia-toned lens of the camera. Like in *Saving Private Ryan*, Eastwood uses nostalgia and the flashback in *Letters* to articulate a sense of Japan’s national pride, history, and identity. This becomes particularly obvious in a comparison of *Letters* with *Flags* as well where similar plot devices are used to develop the audience’s emotional attachment to the soldiers. For instance, both *Flags* and *Letters* devote significant screen time to banter between the men whilst preparing for the upcoming battle. This creates a sense of tragic endearment, acquainting spectators with characters who are later killed, heightening our emotional attachment to the soldiers and their country. Lulled by the familiar devices of the Hollywood patriotic war genre, spectators are seduced into feeling a heightened nostalgia and patriotism for Japan.

Because of the long and dominant influence of Hollywood, it becomes difficult to disassociate the tropes of nostalgia and the flashback from their long-standing cultural association with cinematic representations of American patriotism and national identity. This becomes problematic because instead of engaging with Japanese narratives and

To interpret and re-phrase another national narrative in terms of the language and metaphor of one’s own cultural position inevitably subdues and subjects the other into conformity with one’s cultural parameters. The subject then loses its autonomy to self-represent not with any outward forms of resistance, but through unquestioning relinquishment of the power of speech. When one powerful culture claims to speak for another as if it were given the authority to do so from a supposedly neutral position, what in fact happens is a consumption of difference in ordinance with the homogenising tendency to reprise the values and parameters of the culturally dominant Self. That *Letters* speaks for these marginalised Japanese voices, whilst certainly well-meaning, risks inflicting a “Spivak-ian” state of silence upon the people and culture made to undergo the re-articulation process. I do not mean to say that Japan in any way occupies that oppressed “Third World” or subaltern position that is brought to mind when addressing such inequities of representation. On the contrary, Japan has its own thriving film industry and is willingly undergoing a process of historical re-assessment which mitigates its involvement in WWII. However, when looking purely at the dynamic of “representor” and represented in the case of this film, the power inequality still remains. *Letters* does “speak for” an unpopular world view not commonly witnessed in post-

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25 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” laments the position of the third-world, colonized woman as one that is doubly silenced by patriarchy and colonialism (1999: 35). Her discussion of the silenced subject is applicable to Japan in this case, not for it being a colonized subaltern, but for its years of silence as a WWII enemy within American mass media.
WWII America. The Japanese narrative still remains relatively marginalized in American popular media, and by extension, internationally. The world is more likely to watch Japan through the eyes of a Hollywood film, than it is through a Japanese-made documentary. Eastwood’s re-articulation of a Japanese narrative is therefore invested with the responsibility of cultural representation – one which the film unfortunately disappoints.

This act of cultural re-appropriation is most evident in Eastwood’s reliance upon certain iconic images and motifs from Hollywood war epics. During the preparation of the beach defences, General Tadamichi Kuribayashi, played by Ken Watanabe, hikes up a ridge to survey the layout of the land. The camera pulls back to a long shot as the rising sun in the background frames his stately lone figure in silhouette whilst the soundtrack strikes up a stirring tune. This image and its cinematographic composition – the back lighting from the sun, the use of the long shot, the framing of the figure on the ridge, and the stark composition of the shot, has a long tradition within American war films, dating back to the cultural image of the lone ranger in the American Western. This iconic image is immortalized in the film’s movie poster (fig. 1) – sharing a striking resemblance to that of Saving Private Ryan (fig. 2). In Saving Private Ryan, a similar “heroic shot” is used to visually glorify the team of loyal U.S. soldiers led by Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks), drawing special attention the iconic lone hero.

26 The genre of the Western established the ethos of individualism as a quintessential feature of ideal American masculinity. See Michael Coyne’s introduction to The Crowded Prairie for a discussion on American identity, masculinity, and the image of the lone ranger in the Western film.
From the similarity of the visual trope employed in both shots, it is clear that Eastwood expropriates stylistic motifs traditionally used to cinematically depict American masculinity, and applies them to an interpretation of Japanese heroism. He adopts a visual language that American and global mass audiences, acclimatised to Hollywood’s visual cues, are familiar with. In doing so however, Eastwood also inevitably transposes Hollywood’s notions of heroism and manliness upon the image of General Kuribayashi, forcing him into a mimicry of Hollywood’s American masculinity and valour – a highly stylized presentation of maleness as an idealized visual spectacle. Masculinity is represented differently in traditional Japanese cinema – it is more a depiction of a character’s inner strength and quiet skill as a fighter, than it is a visual spectacle. A brief comparison between the Japanese samurai *jidaigeki* (period drama) and the Hollywood Western reveals these crucial differences.
In early Japanese samurai movies of the ‘40s and ‘50s, whether or not a samurai was deemed heroic was determined by the how well he adhered to the *Bushido* code – displaying strength and chivalry of character – and how skillful he was as a swordsman. Upholding these principles often formed the plot of samurai narratives (Varley, 2000: 184). Akira Kurosawa’s *Seven Samurai* (1954) for instance, represents the nobility of Kyuzo, a master samurai, in such a way. In a duel, Kyuzo is presented as the superior fighter because of the stillness and calmness of his mind. He holds his ground against his rash and unsophisticated opponent who yells and capers about in an unseemly display of brute manliness. Kyuzo does not budge an inch, except when gracefully shifting his weight. When his opponent charges, Kyuzo takes him down with a single stroke. The camerawork imitates the steadiness of Kyuzo’s character, maintaining a single, long-distance still shot throughout the entire duel. The moment passes swiftly and is easy to miss. Kurosawa does not fragment the images through any gratuitous close-ups of the fighters nor does he manipulate the pace of the fight sequence through editing. The camera maintains an unmoving and respectful distance at all times. He does not rely on any awe-inducing slow-motion, low-angle shots of Kyuzo to portray his superiority. The awe that the audience feels for Kyuzo is expressed through characterization, rather than any visual manipulation of the scene. The audience understands the respect due to those who embody the *Bushido* code and embody its ideologies and aesthetics in flawless swordsmanship. Masculinity is not visually encoded within the physical spectacle of the male body – rather, it resides in the strength and nobility of character which is then expressed physically through swordsmanship. In this way, the aesthetic of masculinity in
the Samurai film differs from that of the hero in the American Western. Steve Neale, in an analysis of Sergio Leone’s Westerns, notes that,

The exchange of aggressive looks marking most Western gun-duels is taken to the point of fetishistic parody through the use of extreme and repetitive close-ups. At which point the look begins to oscillate between voyeurism and fetishism as the narrative starts to freeze and spectacle takes over...We see male bodies stylized and fragmented by close-ups... (1993: 17-18)

Kurosawa’s depiction of the noble samurai is lacking in these stylized and fragmented close-ups of the male body. In traditional Japanese samurai films, masculinity is not represented through a visual stylization of the male physique. Hence the physical image of General Kuribayashi in *Letters*, whose figure is cast in silhouette by the setting sun as he hikes up a ridge, is one which references American conceptions of masculinity, rather than Japanese ones.

Even the figure of a solitary man walking in the wilderness, away from society, is an American cultural trope. The image of a lone man within a wide open space often seen in Westerns, is related to America’s western expansion in the nineteenth century and the idea of Manifest Destiny – the providentially sanctioned right to continental expansionism (Yashomoto, 2000: 233). Masculinity and ownership is linked with the conquest of spatial territory in the American imagination. Such spatial freedom in an unmarked wilderness landscape (General Kuribayashi scales the land against the backdrop of the untamed island shrubbery and the open seas), is rare in the *jidaigeki* film (Yashomoto 2000: 233). This is not only because of Japan’s spatial confinement but also because of the lack of the idea of Manifest destiny and the absence of a history of the westward movement of the frontier upon untamed lands. Also, as Mitsuhiro Yashomoto notes, “whereas characters in Westerns have the option of leaving a community and joining a new one, characters in the *jidaigeki* are so rigidly constrained by, or torn
between, *giri* and *ninjo*, that the only available form left is often to kill themselves” (2000: 234). Hence the image of General Kuribayashi scaling a hill and looking out over the island and the ocean is one whose aesthetics are borrowed from the tradition of the Western, which espouses the ideologies of an American history and tradition.

By using Hollywood’s iconic tropes and motifs to represent the cultural Other, Eastwood risks placing Japan in permanent relation to definitive American ideals and ideologies – putting the Other in a position of constant mimicry of the superior qualities of the Self. Though they may appear to be universal, these visual tropes of masculinity, nostalgia, and nationalism are specific to an American visual tradition. Ulf Hedetoft’s argument on the “invisibility” of American national assumptions and ideologies, precisely as a result of the international pervasiveness of Hollywood culture, is particularly significant here.

Powerful [nationalisms, cultures, ideologies] tend towards a universality of meaning, impact and acceptance, as their national-cultural currency becomes transnationally adopted. They tend to lose their national exceptionalism, and to be seen as more or less naturalised frames of reference at several removes…from their national origin…not because they do not have a national origin, but precisely because they have proved so successful as vehicles of national interests, cultures and identities. (2000: 280)

Hedetoft argues that because American nationalism, ideas, and assumptions, are made so globally accessible through Hollywood, after some time they stop appearing “American” and begin to take on a degree of universality. But as Hedetoft reminds us, “Hollywood, as a rule, produces national cinema…[whose] taken-for-granted assumptions and common-sense understandings are of a US origin, no matter how strongly they might parade as global plots, themes and ideas” (2000: 281). Thus when Eastwood appropriates and tries

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27 Tokugawa literature was often concerned with the conflict between human feelings (*ninjo*) and the heavy sense of duty (*giri*) imposed on the individual by feudal laws and mores of the age (Varley, 2000: 184).
to speak for the Japanese narrative, Hollywood, bearing the hidden weight of American cultural representation, consumes the subject’s narrative into its own invisibly dominant cultural form. To borrow the words of post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, the Hollywood narrative is then presented as “universally adequate” in order to “preserve the authority of its identity in the universalist narrative” (Bhabha, 1985: 42).

This argument applies to my reading of Letters from Iwo Jima. Though one might argue that the use of nostalgia as a patriotic device in Letters is not unique to Hollywood, it was the Hollywood war film that established and popularised the theme of nostalgia as a central part of constructing national identity via cinema. Even if the war film’s tendency toward stylistic and aesthetic realism may not be only applicable to Hollywood, one cannot deny that it was the popularity and influence of the large number of Hollywood combat films from the 1940’s that made gritty neo-realism a convention of the war genre. This too, was a response to specific American nationalist concerns during WWII. Likewise, the iconic images of masculinity and heroism are irrevocably associated with the image of the lone ranger, a culturally-specific concept firmly located in the tradition of American folklore and history. Hence, the patriotic/nationalistic film and the war genre and its conventions are inextricably linked with its origins as part of the American patriotic war effort, even though this continuous cultural reference has been made invisible today. With the global pervasiveness of American cinema and the reach of its cultural currency, Hollywood blockbusters have somehow lost their “nationality.”

It becomes easy therefore, for Hollywood films such as Letters to pass off as cosmopolitan; claiming to be an earnest exploration of other nationalisms and culture, since Hollywood’s own national influences have been made invisible and taken to be the
universal referent. It is important, if we are to take the weight of “cosmopolitan cinema” seriously, to re-situate Hollywood films within their origins as national cinema and to be aware of the national/cultural origins of its styles, themes and tropes in whatever translations and permutations.

Simultaneously, in our configuration of cosmopolitan cinema, we must realize the crucial distinction between an inter-national production and a distinctively cosmopolitan text. Whilst *Letters* certainly involves the coming together of nationally diverse cast and crew at the production level, this should not be mistaken for a cosmopolitan text – a text which ideally suspends dominant national narratives and cultural specificities in the interest of negotiating other nationalisms and ideologies. As demonstrated, *Letters*, despite being a transnational production, ends up falling back on familiar tropes from the Hollywood war epic, relying on conventional Hollywood representations of American patriotism in its attempt to represent Japanese history and nationalism. Reading *Letters* as “cosmopolitan” without distinction between production and text would allow popular Hollywood-American mass images to parade as genuine cross-national and intercultural engagement.

The reason why cosmopolitan cinema should bear the weight of these ethical responsibilities lies within the well rehearsed discourse of neo-colonialism. Masao Miyoshi warns in “A Borderless World” that ideas such as transnationalism risks becoming a domineering phenomenon whereby corporations such as Hollywood, once deterritorialized, are ready to consume any local or indigenous site of

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28 Even this statement is to some extent debatable. Eastwood admits to not being able to find a Japanese screenplay writer, settling for Iris Yamashita, a second generation Japanese American. Yamashita herself concedes to being distanced from her Japanese heritage and language, writing the script in English before it was translated into Japanese. Key production roles were also filled by American crew. See “Red Sun, Black Sand: The Making of *Letters from Iwo Jima*," a 20-minute documentary of the film’s production.
resistance/difference behind the ideological pretense of a “borderless” sphere (1996: 92).

Implicit in Miyoshi’s warning is the fear of the “transnational” becoming a new excuse for another neo-colonialist doctrine – a silently universalising phenomenon which effaces difference and self-representation through an unwitting deference to a more dominant power. The same can be said of the cosmopolitan phenomenon. When culturally dominant industries such as Hollywood claim to be “cosmopolitan,” problematic repercussions arise for the integrity of global, national and cultural diversity and autonomy. Hollywood’s sheer power, influence, and wideness of distribution, inevitably risks speaking for and representing other national and cultural identities. Through the process of interpretation, Hollywood subsumes these texts beneath its larger cultural autonomy in the name of “cosmopolitanism.”

Hence, when discussing “cosmopolitan cinema,” one should be aware of this unequal distribution of power and bear in mind the socio-political gravitas behind the term, its potential for misuse and the consequences that arise for international cultural autonomy.

When talking about Hollywood’s cosmopolitan cinema therefore, it is not enough to grant a film a “cosmopolitan” status simply for being a cross-national production with an international cast and crew. This would simply disguise U.S.-Hollywood corporatism as a valid “cosmopolitan” exchange. One must instead look deeper into the text itself to see if it is able to transcend the perimeters of culturally myopic and nation-centric assumptions and understandings in a real attempt to negotiate with other nationalisms and narratives. I am not referring to issues of “authenticity” or matters of “representation vs.

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29 It is not my intention to address the tired dialectical struggle between the coloniser and the colonised, West and East, etc. In fact, this thesis is aimed at overcoming this dialectical divide. When drawing attention to Hollywood’s threat to international cinema, I am merely pointing out that these inter-national inequities in cultural influence have to be acknowledged in within critical practice in order for a more honest criticism.
self-representation.” What I am suggesting is a flexible textual discursivity that is aware of the shortcomings and assumptions of its own way of seeing. A truly cosmopolitan film, as we shall see, attempts to engage with cultural texts that exist beyond its national boundaries in a manner which is discursive and open-ended, rather than authoritative and definitive.

This awareness that is lacking in *Letters* is precisely what *Syriana* achieves. *Syriana* carefully works towards establishing an objective collection of diverse world-views regarding oil politics between the U.S. and the Middle East. The following chapter addresses how the film fulfills an important aspect of discursive cosmopolitanism through its commitment to a multi-perspective and open-ended outlook.
Chapter 4: *Syriana and the Multiperspectival Vision*

Having looked at two examples which fall short of their promise of being true cosmopolitan films, this chapter now turns to *Syriana* – an ensemble drama which comes close to exemplifying the sort of “discursive cosmopolitanism” my paper speaks of. After recapping the notion of discursive cosmopolitanism and discussing the significance of the multiperspectival vision in the cosmopolitan ethic, the chapter then goes on to discuss how *Syriana* takes a step closer towards the discursive cosmopolitan vision through its manipulation of the ensemble narrative structure.

In Chapter 1, I discussed how cosmopolitics has been divided between two ideological tenets since its popular revival in the ‘90s. One is Martha Nussbaum’s notion of a worldwide “moral community…made up by the humanity of all human beings” (Nussbaum, 1994:2). This traditional version of cosmopolitan theory draws from the Kantian legacy of a “perfect civil union of mankind” (Beck, 2003:17). The other is the point of view fore-grounded by theorists such as Craig Calhoun who stress the impossibility and problematic nature of such universalist ambitions. This arm of the cosmopolitan debate argues that the reality of diverse and rooted national, cultural and racial solidarities makes such universal humanist dreams impossible and dangerously homogenizing.

Indeed true universal terms of understanding, as we have seen through the example of *Letters from Iwo Jima*, are near impossible to achieve. What one may define as universal human values are inevitably culturally specific. Therefore, though we may aspire toward a vision of a common global humanity, this so-called ideal must never be
attained – lest it result in a dangerous tendency toward the stipulation of a monolithic and homogenous society which goes against the very principles of cosmopolitanism’s acknowledgement of diversity. I have argued that we cannot think of cosmopolitanism as an endpoint; a place, standard or situation that can be reached. Real cosmopolitanism exists as an in between, as a process of continuous reaching for a universal humanist ideal which must never be attained. Cosmopolitanism is not a static yardstick but a continuing effort, a discursive process of negotiation between rooted solidarities and humanist dreams.

When addressing cinema therefore, what we are looking for is a film which structurally and thematically exhibits these symptoms of “in-betweenness” and constant negotiation. *Syriana* as we shall see, suggests alternative narratives to world events without claiming universal truth and whilst maintaining a non-committal political position. This ideological even-handedness is a critical aspect of the cosmopolitan ethic which determines a film’s commitment to the interest of “a world of human beings” (Nussbaum, 1994: 2). It indicates that flexible in-between-ness which is necessary in our configuration of discursive cosmopolitanism. In her study on Kant and his continued influence in today’s cosmopolitics, Diane Morgan argues:

Kant’s writings refuse that one perspective, that one fixed position. Indeed, such a refusal is integral to, and necessary for, his cosmopolitical project. The fostering of a multiperspectival vision, which thinks the self in relation to other…viewpoints on itself and in terms of the positions of others who surround it, is of crucial importance for a more generous politics which engages more positively and productively in the world. (Morgan, 2007b: 43)

*Syriana* attempts to adopt this discursive multiperspectival position through a variety of means. One is the film’s use of the intersecting ensemble structure to present competing yet valid views on oil politics. The other is the film’s adoption of a deliberately impartial
tone which is achieved through specific stylistic techniques and plot devices. I address the former before going into a discussion of the latter in the later part of this chapter.

Released in 2005, Stephen Gaghan’s *Syriana* revolves around oil politics and U.S. foreign intervention in the middle-east, and the consequences of these trans-national economic interactions. The plot moves across the parallel stories of an energy analyst, Brian Woodman, a CIA operative, Bob Barnes, a Washington attorney, Bennet Holiday, and a young unemployed Pakistani migrant worker, Wasim. These four intertwined stories detail Gulf oil politics, American capitalist corruption, and the wide-reaching effects of trans-national economies. U.S. oil magnate Connex lost the rights to major oil-fields in the Middle East to China. To counter the loss of supply, Connex merged with Killen, who acquired rights to oil in Kazakhstan through corruption and bribery. Meantime, Emirates Prince Nasir is planning a military coup so that he can initiate development and democratic reform in his country. This is however, contrary to U.S. interests and Nasir and his family are later assassinated by the CIA. Amid the play of global politics, migrant Pakistani worker Wasim is retrenched from his job on the Connex oil rigs after a Chinese company takes over operations in that facility. Faced with poverty, he joins an Islamic school which provides him the sense of purpose and belonging he seeks. He agrees to lead a suicide mission to destroy a Connex-Killen oil tanker.

*Syriana’s* ensemble format offers alternative points of view on the situation on oil politics. On the one hand, we have the Texas oil magnates and their patriotic justifications for the corrupt acquisition of cheap oil from Kazakhstan and the Middle
East. On the other, we witness the arguments of Prince Nasir who wants to develop his country from revenue obtained by selling oil to the highest bidder. We even look into the story of Wasim – a martyr for from an Islamic fundamentalist group. Each perspective offers a different world-view which Gaghan presents with careful diligence.

Bennet Holiday’s narrative offers an insight into the U.S. side of the oil tussle. It presents the arguments of members of Connex-Killen as to why the U.S. should be allowed to continue obtaining cheap energy through corruption and oppression in the Middle East. These justifications draw on the patriotic need to defend their country’s interests and maintain the American way of life. Johnny Pope exclaims, “We use one quarter of the oil in the world, Bennet. Your house is light and warm and my house is light and warm…. Hell, the Chinese economy isn’t growing as fast as it could because they can’t get all the oil they need. And I’m damn proud of that fact.” Danny Dalton, who works for Killen and is a member of the Committee to Liberate Iran,\textsuperscript{30} rants at Holiday who threatens to level corruption charges against the company. “Corruption is our protection. Corruption is what keeps us safe and warm. Corruption is why you and I are here in the white-hot centre of things instead of fighting each other for scraps of meat out there in the streets. Corruption is why we win.” Holiday, realizing the realities of the system, eventually lets the merger carry on. He says, “this merger is so balance-positive for American consumers that ultimately Justice wants it, the Federal court wants it. Everybody wants it. Our real client is us, the American people.” The law is negotiable for those who control it. “Global justice” is a guise which conceals the fact that real international influence lies only with powerful First World nations. \textit{Syriana} depicts how

\textsuperscript{30} The Committee to Liberate Iran in \textit{Syriana} consists of American oil magnates involved in the corrupt dealings in the Middle-East. The committee is portrayed as a hypocritical and self-righteous group who truly believe they are contributing to the “liberation of Iran.”
the U.S. believes that it is their right to protect the interests of their country and therefore their right to attain cheap energy at whatever cost, even at the expense of the rest of the world.

At the same time, Prince Nasir presents the other story – the consequence of constant U.S. interference in the Gulf. Nasir plans to carry out a military coup to seize control of the regency from his brother and his American supporters. He wants to set up an understanding in which his country’s valuable oil resource will no longer be reserved for cheap and easy access by the U.S. He wishes to sell his oil to the highest bidder and use the profits to develop his country. His world-view is one which has the interests of his own country at heart and for this he is persecuted by the U.S. Nasir declares,

I want to create a parliament… I’ll put all of our energy up for competitive bidding... I’ll ship to China, anything that achieves efficiency and maximizes profits for my people, profits which I’ll then use to rebuild my country...I accepted a Chinese bid, the highest bid. And suddenly I’m a terrorist, I’m a godless communist.

Syriana allows Nasir to express his reasons behind the military coup and for wanting to go against U.S. interests. It allows audiences to listen to a view-point alternative to that which only sees things from the U.S. perspective and is only sympathetic towards U.S. agendas.

The film also avoids an easy dismissal of Wasim’s terrorist act and of Islamic fundamentalism, instead detailing the circumstances which pushed Wasim towards forging a sense of belonging with the group. Rather than writing them off as faceless monsters, Syriana attempts to look into their stories and their political motivations.31 In

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31 Jack G. Shaheen’s Reel Bad Arabs (2001) surveys 950 films, and argues that Arabs constitute the most maligned group in Hollywood history. In his latest publication, Guilty: Hollywood’s verdict on Arabs after 9/11 (2008), Shaheen writes, “I am somewhat encouraged to report that since 9/11, silver screens have displayed at times, more complex, evenhanded Arab portraits than I have seen in the past. Some producers did not dehumanize Arabs, and instead presented decent, heroic characters.” (2008:35).
one such scene, Wasim, Farooq, and other teenage boys sit before a preaching cleric as they eat lamb and fries. The cleric speaks,

The pain of living in a modern world will never be solved by a liberal society. Liberal societies have failed. Christian theology has failed. The West has failed. The divine and the worldly are but a single concept and that concept is Koran. No separation of religion and state – Koran. Instead of kings legislating and slaves obeying – Koran.

There is logic to the cleric’s words. He is not simply denouncing other belief systems, but is reasoning why selfish “Western capitalism” has failed, and why a theocracy managed by the teachings of the Koran would lead to greater justice. *Syriana*, though not endorsing such doctrine entirely, certainly does acknowledge the existence of a corrupt capitalist system in which powerful First World nations consistently maintain the upper hand. The film acknowledges how the ideologies of these fundamentalist groups seem relevant to people such as Wasim who bear the brunt of fickle global economies. It is Wasim and others like him who are laid off when a Chinese firm takes over an energy processing plant in the Middle East from the Americans. On the film’s insight into the rationale behind Islamic fundamentalism Clooney says, “It is not an excuse for it at all. But it says that you can’t just categorise things” (from *A Conversation with George Clooney*, 2006, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.). Recognizing the complex link between the local and the global, the film’s ensemble structure takes a careful look at how the decisions of powerful figures affect global politics which in turn affect individual lives and identities.

It is important to note however, that even though the film presents various parties’ points-of-view with diligence, *Syriana* is careful not to promote these world views or

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32 Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake discuss how, in spite of a globalizing world, the local and the global have become even more intricately linked. The need for new cosmopolitan theory to recognize this phenomenon is discussed in Chapter 5.
pass them off as valid justifications. Instead, the film adopts a critical stance towards American capitalism and foreign politics, as well as religious fundamentalism and terrorism. *Syriana* specifically questions our definition of terrorism, arguing that terrorism should be a label applied to the actions of both religious fundamentalists, as well as the corrupt and oppressive practices of First World capitalists. This critique is performed through the juxtaposition of the story’s key narratives in the final climactic scenes.

In these last scenes, the U.S. missile assassination of Prince Nasir is juxtaposed with Wasim’s suicide attack on the Connex-Killen oil tanker. The film questions our somewhat one-sided definition of terrorism by juxtaposing the cold, calculated brutality of the former against the impassioned, faith-driven act of the latter. The former attack takes place as Nasir and his family traverse the desert. Nasir and his family are constantly referred to as “targets” to be “taken out” – the military rhetoric drawing attention to their dehumanized position. Indeed, Nasir’s convoy is captured on the consoles in the U.S. task force bunker from where the attack is coordinated with an extreme long distance shot. Via satellite, they appear as little more than pixels on a screen. Gaghan cuts between the officers in the war control room, the satellite shots taken of Nasir’s convoy, and close-ups of Nasir and his family in the car. The spectator is forced to feel an intimacy with the character as well as a sense of dread and unwilling separation when the shot switches back to the extreme long distance satellite view. When the missile hits, the screen is filled with grey smoke and the sound of an explosion. Midway through the shot, the scene abruptly cuts to the satellite image of the explosion seen from the war bunker. The sound of the detonation, so overpowering a split second before, is suddenly muted.
The audience is pulled from ground zero to the cold detachment of the war room; the convoy of cars and smoke are now tiny on a computer screen. A brief shot of the officers in the task force bunker congratulating each other, is immediately followed by a cut to a dinner party celebrating the Connex-Killen merger and the continuation of U.S. oil trade in the Middle-East. The noise of the applause bleeds slightly into the scene in the war room before cutting to the images of cheering crowds at the celebration dinner. This is one of the few moments in the film in which a sound bridge links the transition between two disparate narratives. The technique implies that the crowd cheers in a grotesque celebration of Nasir’s assassination. It is no secret that the U.S. benefits from keeping the Middle East in a state of chaos and underdevelopment. As Sydney Hewitt, Connex’s Washington council, boasts, “you just visited what someday soon could be the most profitable corporation in America…Provided there’s still chaos in the Middle East.”

Gaghan uses these cross-cuts to depict the ugliness and corruption of U.S. foreign politics and the oil business, drawing attention to the cold-blooded, profit driven motivations behind Nasir’s calculated murder by U.S. intelligence.

The chilly detachment of Nasir’s assassination scenes are then immediately juxtaposed with the suicide attack carried out by Wasim and his friend Farooq, which is invested with a more elegiac quality. Farooq drives their missile laden fishing vessel toward the tanker accompanied by a haunting soundtrack. As the vessel approaches, the camera cuts to a close-up of Wasim as a peaceful smile appears on his face. An instant before impact, there is an intense white-out and the scene cuts to the Islamic school compound where Wasim’s “suicide tape” is playing. He looks straight into the camera and talks about his wishes for his funeral. Unlike Nasir’s assassination, Wasim’s suicide
bombing is depicted with more sentimentalism. I do not believe that Gaghan attempts to glorify Wasim’s terrorist attack by portraying the bombing scene in this manner. Rather, these last scenes are an attempt to depict Wasim and Farooq’s mental and emotional state, to see the act of suicide from Wasim and Farooq’s point-of-view. The initial frames in the scene are shot in an objective style with no attempt to evoke any particular emotional response from the audience. Many establishing, long-distance shots are used and the few close-ups of Wasim and Farooq are brief and are only meant to establish their presence in this scene. Whilst the little fishing boat speeds over the water, however, the camera cuts to a close-up of Farooq, dwelling on him for some time before moving on to Wasim. The ambient noise of the boat engine and the waves fades to silence and is replaced by a haunting soundtrack. This is where the transition occurs between the film’s detached depiction of the lead up to attack, and the point where the film tries to express Wasim and Farooq’s experience. The rest of the shots leading up to the collision are mostly close-ups of the two, depicting the expressions of sublime peace on their faces in the final moments. The close-ups, poignant music, and the nostalgia of the suicide tapes allow audiences to understand Wasim and Farooq’s motivations and their emotional state.

Although the film appears to display sympathy for the boys’ predicament, it is in fact very critical of the insidious ways in which religious fundamentalist groups manipulate desperate and disenfranchised youths like Wasim. Prior scenes detail how the organization used food to lure young recruits. At a foreign workers compound in the Persian Gulf, Farooq remarks to Wasim, “They gave us French fries at the madrasah…And lamb. Skewers of lamb.” When the boys turn up at the madrasah for the food, a cleric takes the opportunity to preach to them about the problems with the current
world system and how Islam could result in a better world for poor people like themselves. Uneducated and impressionable, they are seduced by the learned philosophies of the cleric and are later singled out to perform the suicide act. Mohammed Sheik Agiza, a handsome Egyptian religious man, praises them for their virtue and courage. Unused to the attention, Farooq and Wasim are eager to please him. The two boys are not the only ones who have been made use of by the group. A suicide tape plays in which another teenage boy announces his burial wishes after his martyrdom. *Syriana* is critical of the madrasah for preying on vulnerable youths, encouraging them to give up their lives for the organization’s political agenda. Wasim and Farooq are merely tools for the larger organization.

By juxtaposing these scenes, Gaghan draws attention to the tyranny of both Islamic fundamentalist organizations, and organizations in the so-called “free world” – whether government institutions or corrupt private corporations. He forces audiences to question the act of “terrorism” and asks us to reconsider whom the label of “terrorists” should also be applied to. *Syriana* forces audiences to listen to another world view, and broaden and re-negotiate our own. Gaghan manipulates the narrative ensemble form to contrast multiple story threads which forces a comparison of these separate accounts. In doing so, audiences are pushed to re-negotiate their assumptions about “terrorism” and “liberation,” the “bad guys” and the “good guys”.

*Syriana* can therefore be said to forward cosmopolitanism’s project of trying to empathize with one’s cultural Other, or understand a marginalized narrative which has been consistently demonized in public rhetoric. It also forces a critical re-assessment of the Self, particularly of American policy and values. The film presents various narratives
with its ensemble structure, including alternative takes on current oil politics and religious-political tensions between the U.S. and the Middle-East. *Syriana* thus works at fostering a “multiperspectival vision” (Morgan, 2007b: 43) through its ensemble structure – an important element of the cosmopolitan ethic.

*Syriana* also establishes an inter-narrative connectedness whereby each character affects the stories of others. *Syriana* shows how ideologies and events, alien to each other, generate global chains of cause-and-effect across the globe. For instance, protecting the interests of U.S. citizens come at the expense of Prince Nasir and his people. Terrorism arises from the dissatisfaction with a world run by Western capitalism. *Syriana* is constructed in terms of a network of characters whose narratives comment on each other. This way, the film as a whole constantly shifts perspectives and ideologies, displaying their inter-connectedness whilst refusing to advocate one ideology over another. As Diane Morgan argues, the ability to adopt a macro perspective of the self in relation to other perspectives is critical to the Kantian construction of cosmopolitanism (2007b: 43). More than just giving voice to marginalized narratives, the mixture of ensemble perspectives in *Syriana* also maintains a balance of diverse culturally-specific ideologies.

George Clooney, the executive producer of *Syriana*, claims that the film “was designed like films of the ‘70s which were willing to discuss geopolitical issues without pointing a finger directly at one specific person” (from *A Conversation with George Clooney*, 2006, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc.). The film adopts the narratives of diverse individuals who represent groups with opposing yet equally valid interests. At the same time, Gaghan stays clear of making any conclusive statements which may be seen
to offer a solution to these concerns. *Syriana* presents hypotheses and speculations of the motivations behind the phenomenon of corruption and religious fanaticism but avoids a moral judgment on either. This aspect of the film has earned a fair share of criticism.

Mike Wagstaff of the *Iran Bulletin* comments, “the real problem with the film [is that] *Syriana* isn’t too hot on diagnosis and doesn’t really address the issue of how to create a fair society in a capitalist world dominated by imperialism.” (http://www.iran-bulletin.org/Art%20and%20Culture/syriana.htm) Contrary to Wagner’s charge, I argue that such avoidance is a deliberate decision. *Syriana*’s unwillingness to commit to a universal solution or an easy, common understanding reflects the film’s commitment to the ethics of cosmopolitanism – that no solution or world view, no matter how constructive and benevolent it may appear, can ever represent the interests of every group with equality.

*Syriana* achieves this sense of political and ideological impartiality though distinct stylistic and narrative techniques. The opening-credit sequence establishes a thoughtful tone and introduces a “documentary feel” that is maintained for the rest of the film. The film begins with the call for Muslim prayers, followed by a montage of shots. A soft background chime is played to the image of a red sun rising over plains hazy with pre-dawn fog. A long distance shot reveals groups of workers waiting as a bus draws up. There are shots of the crowd jostling to get onboard and feet standing in line. A tighter close-up allows us to see their inexpressive faces staring blankly at the camera. The entire scene plays in silence, except for the melancholic chiming. The shots are evenly paced, periodically interrupted by the credits which appear white on a black screen. The images are washed in a grainy, smoky tone – reminiscent of documentary footage. The lack of
ambient noise creates a sense of visual distance and objectivity, as if one were watching
the scenes through a silent newsreel. The shots are non-narrative and are not part of a
dramatic storyline, again reminiscent of the sort of disconnected footage used in
documentaries, where disjointed images are put together and make sense only because of
the voice-over commentaries. Even the Islamic call to prayer on the soundtrack creates a
tone of somber seriousness, preparing the audience for the film’s heavy religious and
political themes. An almost similar presentation of the opening credits can be seen in
Natalie Assouline’s documentary, *Brides of Allah* (2008), pointing to how close *Syriana*
comes to creating a documentary feel for the film. The opening sequence prepares the
audience for a movie dealing with serious themes with aloof realism and clinical
objectivism.

This sense of emotional detachment is sustained throughout the rest of the film.
Various reviewers have criticized *Syriana* for being too detached and for parading a set of
characters for whom the audience lacks emotional attachment. As a political study
which prides itself on a “talky” intellectualism, perhaps the film restrains from indulging
in a more emotive or dramatized depiction of its political theme. More specifically,
*Syriana* avoids partialness toward any particular ideology by not heroicising or
demonizing any particular character. Unlike *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters From Iwo
Jima* where the soldiers were portrayed as ordinary men who become heroes, Robert
Barnes in *Syriana* is not depicted as a patriotic hero for protecting U.S. interests in the
Middle East. Nor is his character invested with the suffering nobility of soldiers such as

John Bradley in *Flags of our Fathers*, a soldier tormented by the cruelty of the battle field. Barnes, who is given the task of assassinating Prince Nasir, does not experience an emotional or moral dilemma. He changes his mind about killing the prince not because of any moral misgivings but because he learns that the CIA has abandoned him after sending him out to do the task. Unlike Bradley, noble patriotism is never mentioned in Barnes lines, nor is his death accompanied by any sentimentalism. Barnes dies in the same missile assassination attack that kills Nasir. Just as he is about to speak, he is cut off with a loud explosion. No stirring soundtrack, close-ups, nor empathy-inducing techniques such as slow-motion or soft focus were used. The demise of this character barely resounds with the audience.

One gets the impression that Gaghan deliberately avoids making his characters larger than life, or creating too close an empathetic relationship between the audience and specific characters. This is a deliberate tactic to keep the film’s multiperspectival objective in focus. By keeping audiences at an emotional distance from the film’s characters, Gaghan forces spectators to occupy a detached and objective position. He encourages the viewer to assess the justifications of diverse ideologies, rather than form an emotional bias to the ideologies of specific characters. The scripting and presentation of the characters themselves are geared towards *Syriana’s* larger objective – to present an even-handed, multiperspectival take on an international situation.

*Syriana* departs from *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Flags of our Fathers* in this respect. A sense of objective multiperspectivism is lacking in the latter films. When seen as separate films rather than as co-productions, *Letters* and *Flags* each present only a one-sided view of war. After all, both movies were largely viewed as separate entities,
being released two months apart and marketed separately. Each film also appealed to
different audience groups, with *Flags* grossing about US$20 million more at the domestic
box office than *Letters*, whilst *Letters* fared better with an international audience earning
US$54.9 million in comparison to *Flags* which took home US$32 million.\(^{34}\) Although
they comment on each other, each movie is only meant to flesh out a singular perspective
of the battle at Iwo Jima. And as discussed, even *Letters’s* noble attempt to fairly
represent the Japanese perspective of World War II obscures problematic assumptions. In
seeking to portray the protagonists in the film dramatically, *Letters* draws on culturally
rooted images and dramatic techniques which it assumes to be universal. It does not, like
*Syriana* force a detachment from the persuasive pressures of cultural and political
ideologies coercively presented in visual dramatic form. *Syriana* thus maintains an air of
greater objectivity and impartiality, allowing it to stay clear of the culturally specific
dramatic techniques that *Letters* so problematically employs. For this reason, *Syriana*
forwards the cosmopolitan project by acting out a key component of Kant’s conditions
for perpetual peace – an active attempt to always keep in mind perspectives beyond one’s
own. It is possible that clinical detachment may be the only means of negotiating themes
of international conflict and political difference with any degree of Kantian
“multiperspectival” ethics.

But for all its attempts to fairly portray the different sides to global politics
however, one wonders if *Syriana* lacks an equally important element of the cosmopolitan
practice – a tone which reveals a “love of humanity” which Nussbaum and Kant consider
crucial in any “cosmopolitan” text. In “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism”, Nussbaum

\(^{34}\) www.boxofficemojo.com.
talks about cosmopolitanism as a practice of rationality borne out the love of humanity (1994: 6). This “love of humanity” is also mentioned by Kant in *Geschichte* as the reason why divided peoples should strive for a mutual human community (1912: 471, translated in Morgan, 2007a: 9). Indeed, this somewhat nebulous and sentimental impulse is itself the motivating factor behind the cosmopolitan dream. It is what distinguishes mere social and political commentary/criticism from the ethical ambitions of cosmopolitan vision. What is lacking in *Syriana* is a larger humanist vision – a hope for humanity which extends beyond a criticism of existing problems.

The subtle differences in tone to which I am referring to may seem a tremulous premise on which to discern a text’s dedication toward the cosmopolitan ethic. But as Julia Kristeva writes in defence of Kantian cosmopolitanism’s noble vision,

> Kant knew that the idea seemed preposterous – “fantastical,” he said, thinking of how it was laughed at by the Abbe de Saint-Pierre and by Rousseau. Nevertheless, it seemed imperative to him “as the necessary outcome…” (1991: 171)

As followers of Kantian ethics must realize, cosmopolitanism is by its very definition an intangible ideal. It is a constant struggling towards the noble sentiment of humanist love. As I have established in Chapter 1, the motivation behind cosmopolitan ethics is a desire for perpetual peace amongst all humanity. This is a dream that is derived from a purposeful sense of hope and empathy for humankind. For a text to be considered truly cosmopolitan in nature, it has to embody this elusive ideal. *Syriana*, as a purposefully detached and pessimistic criticism on the state of humanity and our selfish politics, neglects this aspect of the cosmopolitan project.

Hence, beyond maintaining the integrity of multiple perspectives, the cosmopolitan film is also about reaching for an intangible means of human
connectedness. More than just respecting difference, the cosmopolitan dream wants to transcend these divisions. Chapter 5 finally turns to how *Babel* goes a step further than *Syriana* and strives for the impractical humanist dream even as it simultaneously avoids the danger of universalist platitudes. An epitome of the “discursive cosmopolitan text”, *Babel* straddles the local and global through its ensemble narrative structure, imagining a transnational connectedness whilst still acknowledging the real effects of cultural and national specificities.
Chapter 5: Practicing Cosmopolitanism in Babel: Towards a Discursive Negotiation in Cinema

No space disappears in the course of growth and development: the worldwide does not abolish the local.

– Henri Lefebvre, *La production de l’espace*.

In the above quote, Lefebvre notes that when thinking about a larger humanity in a global world, local cultures and solidarities cannot be dismissed. Such a sentiment relates directly to the notion of discursive cosmopolitanism which this project pursues. Even whilst larger global connections or humanist ties may be desired, this does not include an abolishment of local identities and the institutionalized differences of nation and culture. Earlier chapters have demonstrated how trying to establish a working, universal worldview becomes problematic because these so-called “universal” ideologies are always culturally determined. Chapter 4 on the other hand, argued how a lack of hope for a global community falls short of the very meaning of the cosmopolitan dream. What our new version of “discursive cosmopolitanism” must then work towards is a state of constantly reaching, but never achieving, that ideal Kantian community of human beings. What we are looking for is an unreachable universal humanism which, in never attaining its goal, embodies the cosmopolitan dream without dangerously trying to articulate the impossible universal. As Judith Butler argues, the universal, though desirable, must never be fully or finally achieved in order to resist domestication (1995: 131). As discussed in Chapter 1, our new cosmopolitan form should therefore exist as a constant and discursive negotiation between the universal humanist dream and the recognition of real diversities and local solidarities.
Of the four films addressed in this paper, *Babel* comes closest to capturing this notion of discursive cosmopolitanism. It does so by maintaining a balance between the acknowledgement of difference and divisive solidarities even as it envisions a larger hope for a common, global humanity. After a discussion of the significance of the local/global dynamic within the cosmopolitan ethic, this chapter addresses how *Babel* negotiates this tricky discursivity.

Before engaging in an analysis of *Babel* and its local/global negotiations, it is first necessary to discuss the paradoxical relationship between globalism and localism. The continued existence of both imaginaries in an increasingly transnational world relates directly to my call for cosmopolitan theory to acknowledge both the larger humanist dream and the existence of localized solidarities.

In the preface to *Global/Local*, Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake discuss how cultural production and national representation are becoming simultaneously,

…more globalized (unified around dynamics of capital logic moving across borders) and more localized (fragmented into contestatory enclaves of difference, coalition, and resistance). (1996: 1)

Wilson and Dissanayake argue that globalization has paradoxically led to a strengthening of local ties, allegiances, and identity politics within different nation state formations. Masao Miyoshi sees today’s neorevivalism, neoracism, and neoethnicism as a result of the decline of the nation-state in a world moving towards transnational politics and economies;

Ethnicity and raciality are being brandished as the refuge from the predicaments of an integrated political and economic body. As globalization intensifies, neoethnicism is appealing because of its brute simplicity and reductivism in this rapidly altering and bewilderingly complex age. (1996: 90)
In *Reimagining the Nation*, Mathew Horsman also argues that the growth of international economies have incited tribalist tendencies even within the nation state. Integration across national boundaries and the weakening of government’s exclusive control over national economies, forces the individual to seek community in allegiances independent of the traditional nation-state (1994: 186). These allegiances often occur along ethnic, linguistic and religious lines, resulting in greater social fragmentation. What results is “the uncomfortable co-existence of tribalism and globalism” (Horsman, 1994: 187) – evidence of the interdependent nature of the local and the global in the constitution of identity politics. Contrary to embracing a borderless world, transnational production and culture flows bring the local into interaction with the global (Hall, 1993: 354). Rather than seeing micropolitical (national/cultural) identities as being opposed to and threatened by macropolitical (global) connections, it is necessary to view both imaginaries as engaging in a continuum of constant interaction and flux.

Cosmopolitan discursivity then provides the model for how we might articulate the global and the local in terms of geopolitical ethics. Discursive cosmopolitanism is an ethical philosophy that acknowledges the paradoxical fragmentation and connectivity that marks the centre of globalization dynamics. It takes into consideration the dual impulse towards the idealized notions of global community, as well as the divisive need to identify with specific solidarities in everyday life. A discursive cosmopolitan text would therefore aspire towards a humanist vision, but at the same time, acknowledges existing national, cultural, ethnic and economic divisions. *Babel* embodies this worldview of connectivity and fragmentation; the desire for similarity and yet the constant negotiation of difference. It goes a step beyond *Syriana* in that it dares to dream of a connected
humanity even as it deals with the politics of segregation. *Babel* offers a way of linking the most intimately local – our particular path through the world – and the most global – the crucial features of our political planet.

Directed by Alejandro Gonzáles Iñárritu, *Babel* is a multi-narrative drama which links stories taking place in Japan, Morocco, Mexico, and the United States. Two young Moroccan boys, Yussef and Ahmed, are given a gun by their father to protect their goats from jackals. What begins as a playful challenge results in the shooting of Susan, an American tourist traveling with her estranged husband, Richard. Amid sensationalized media allegations of a terrorist attack, young Ahmed is killed by Moroccan officials in a shootout. Simultaneously, Amelia, the nanny for Richard and Susan’s two young children – Mike and Debbie – in San Diego, is forced to take her charges to her son’s wedding in Mexico. When re-entering the U.S., Amelia’s nephew, provoked by racist border police, leaves them stranded in the desert. Eventually they are found, only to have unsympathetic border officials extradite Amelia back to Mexico. Meanwhile, in Japan, teenage Chieko Wataya struggles with her mother’s suicide and with the loneliness and alienation of being deaf-mute in an urban landscape. The plot reveals that the gun which initiated the tragedy in Morocco once belonged to her father. Though these stories can function as self-contained narratives, Iñárritu draw links between these disparate characters across the globe. As the multiple tales unfold, relationships between characters are revealed and the audience is left with a sense of the interconnectedness of humanity and human experience, even as the film critiques the structures of disparity and injustice set in place by economic and political divisions between third world and first world nations.
Babel’s attention to the paradoxical incidence of both integration and fragmentation is evident in its use of the ensemble narrative structure and in the editing between these separate narratives. As much as the inherent nature of the ensemble drama is to draw links between the similarities and connectedness of its component stories, the juxtaposition of these stories also forces a comparison of their differences. This co-existing, yet paradoxical effect of the ensemble narrative structure is demonstrated through Iñárritu’s varied use of editing and narrative juxtapositions. Iñárritu often uses graphic and sound matches, and transitory links between different arms of the ensemble narratives. As we shall see, these techniques create a seamless transition across cultural and national borders, creating a sense of human connectedness. Iñárritu also frequently uses abrupt jump cuts between these separate scenes which create a sense of discontinuity and fragmentation. Using these very different editing techniques serves a specific purpose. Demonstrating the common humanity as well as the systemic separations between these different characters articulates a discursive cosmopolitan ethic in which global human connectivity and real national/ethnic solidarities exist in constant negotiation.

The editing sequences between the story of Yussef and Ahmad, and Amelia and her wards, provide an example. A graphic match is used to link Yussef and Ahmad’s scene, as they turn to flee after shooting at the tourist bus in the mountains of Morocco, with the next scene, in which Mike scampers across the kitchen in his suburban American home. This visual match connects these children from opposite ends of the cultural and economic spectrum. By matching the motion of the children running, Iñárritu links the
young goatherder brothers in the Moroccan desert to the privileged child in White suburban America. He draws the link between the young boys at play, despite their radically different economic and political positions. This match between seemingly separate stories within the ensemble narrative metaphorically bridge distance, national borders, and the divides of language and culture, closing the gaps of difference and drawing attention to the likeness of human experience and furnishing a sense of global connectedness.

As events pick up however, Iñárritu moves away from these seamless transitions toward more abrupt editing styles. In a later scene, the creak of the door in the Moroccan boys’ hut as they lie in bed, bleeds into vibrant Mexican music. Seconds later, the scene cuts to a montage of the streets of Mexico where Mike and Debbie sit in the car, watching in amazement. Despite the audio bridge, the visual disconnect between the still interior of the hut at night and the vivacity of the Mexican streets in the afternoon portends the dislocation to come. Towards the middle of the film, Iñárritu uses fewer transitory matches or crossovers between these narratives. As the plot draws toward a climax, it becomes clear how different the worlds of Yussef and Ahmad, and Mike and Debbie are, and how different their fates will be. Abrupt editing signifies this disconnect. In one scene, Yussef, Ahmad and their father are fleeing over the mountains when the Moroccan police catch up with them and open fire. Yussef returns fire and hits an officer in the arm. Just then, the scene suddenly cuts to raucous music and dancing at the wedding of Amelia’s son in Mexico. The dislocation is distinct in both sound and image, separating these two narratives even further. As events come to a head, the characters’ stories are increasingly controlled by larger global political forces which have very different
implications for those of different skin color and nationality. The structural separations between the narrative branches, particularly between the stories of Yussef, Amelia, and Richard, signify these disparate experiences and the real discriminations and privileges that are available to certain groups and not others.

As goatherder’s sons in a Third World Muslim country, Yussef and Ahmad are lower on the so-called political hierarchy of the value of human life, and are thus considered dispensable. Quick to act on existing paranoia, the U.S. blames the shot fired at Susan on local terrorists and Moroccan police, eager to appear competent before the scrutiny of the Western media, brutalize Moroccan villagers in their hunt for the shooter. The police unquestioningly open fire on the two boys and their father as they attempt to escape. Ahmad is fatally wounded and Yussef is arrested. Their lives and their futures are considered expendable amid the play of global politics – a system which protects the interests of select First World countries over others. Being American, Susan’s injury is given full political and media attention. The news of Susan’s rescue is broadcast on a Japanese channel, “The American people finally have their happy ending, after five frantic phone calls and hand wringing.” As citizens of a subaltern world, Ahmed’s death goes unmentioned and Yussef’s arrest is seen as justice against terrorism. Their fates turn out very differently from those of the American children in Amelia’s story.

Unlike the Moroccan children, Mike and Debbie are presented as fragile, blonde angels, who have to be protected from rowdy, lustful Mexicans. By creating such an idealized image of childhood, Iñárritu excites in the spectator the desire to protect these children, an impulse notably absent in the portrayal of Yussef and his brother. Various scenes depict Mike and Susan cowering as a chicken is beheaded and the local children
play in the mud. In one scene, the spectator waits in horrified suspense at the sound of
gunshots before Iñárritu cuts to the image of the smiling children beside Amelia. Iñárritu
effectively creates in the spectator, the same sense of paranoia and over-heightened
sensibility that pervade these children’s prototypical WASP upbringing. This impulse to
protect the White child from the colored predator harks from an old tradition of racial
prejudice.35 Babel depicts how these prejudices are ingrained within U.S. border policies.
A border patrol officer becomes suspicious when he sees the blonde children asleep in the
back of a car driven by Hispanics. The camera cuts between Amelia’s clearly Latin
American features and the angelically sleeping children. His tone, clearly disdainful
when speaking to Amelia and Santiago, becomes simpering when addressing the
children. His harassment and discriminatory attitude goads an already irate Santiago into
running the border which later results in Amelia’s deportation from America. Amelia’s
story comments on the persecuting and exclusionary nature of American border policy –
an institutionalized prejudicial system which acts upon corporeal difference and skin
colour.

In the essay “On Cosmopolitanism,” Jacques Derrida writes about the creation of
cities as places of asylum, as a necessary component in an international system of
cosmopolitanism. He highlights the significance of border police who are real and
metaphorical impediments to “universal hospitality as a right of residence” (2001: 21).

One has to mindful of the profound problem of the role and status of the police,
of, in the first instance, border police, but also of a police without borders,
without determinable limit, who … become all-pervasive and elusive…police

35 Stephanie Larson addresses the longstanding stereotype of Hispanics as violent criminals in Media and
Minorities. The Mexican “bandit” stereotype dates back to silent movies and early Westerns. See also Chon
Noriega’s introduction to Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance (1992). Babel indeed
critiques this stereotype, arguing that Santiago loses his temper after being disrespectfully treated by racist
border police officers.
violence is both “faceless” and “formless,” and is thus beyond all accountability. (2001: 14)

The border police officer in *Babel* actively practices racial prejudice as a procedure of the law. *Babel* draws attention to the institutionalization of racial exclusion in U.S. border politics which goes against Derrida’s notion of the human right to hospitality. This brings us back to the point that Craig Calhoun makes with regard to the cosmopolitan dream and the reality of existing difference.

[Nationalism] is not vanishing... Globalization challenges nation-states and intensifies flows across their borders, but it doesn’t automatically make them matter less. (Calhoun, 2007: 9)

As much as we might wish to imagine a Nussbaumian community of people united by common ethical humanism, to do so without regard for distinct racial, national, and socio-economic positions risks ignoring the definitive factors which determine human life.

*Babel* is careful not to make this mistake – the film imagines cultural landscapes, ethnic/national affiliations, and the distinct political consequences of these with clarity. Each story takes places in a clearly demarcated cultural/national landscape distinguished through differences in visual composition and cinematography. Iñárritu peppers each narrative thread or culture-scape with visual montages and a specific soundtrack. J-pop music, sounds of traditional Japanese string instruments, and the still images of the empty streets of Tokyo characterize Chieko’s urban environment. A collage of images of the buzzing streets of Mexico accompanied by up-tempo Mexican music characterize Amelia’s story. Iñárritu uses different technical means to achieve a different effect for each region. In an interview with ign.com, Iñárritu explains, “Each story is shot in different formats: Morocco is shot in 16mm, Mexico is 35mm, Japan is shot in an
anamorphic lens” (http://movies.ign.com/articles/742/742071p2.html). Iñárritu makes it a point to distinguish between each national and cultural space, by setting them apart visually and narratively.

Though Iñárritu acknowledges this difference, he also critiques the continued existence of such policed boundaries. In an effort to deconstruct how people define their borders of inclusion and exclusion, *Babel* alternately provokes alienation towards a cultural group within one narrative, whilst encouraging empathy with it via another. Iñárritu manipulates audience’s fickle perspectives by juxtaposing the story of Susan and Richard with that of Yussef and Ahmed. In Richard’s story, the culture and people of Morocco are defamiliarised to the point of alienation and fear. When the bus first enters the Moroccan village where Richard desperately seeks medical attention for Susan, the audience is shown a montage sequence of the Moroccan village landscape from the point-of-view of a tourist through a glass window in the coach. Apart from the mournful sounds of a Middle-Eastern tune, these images of shrouded women, solemn old men, and dark silhouettes watching from the rooftops of mud buildings, all take place in a cold and watchful silence. Through the eyes of frightened tourists, the Moroccan people are alien and threatening. The series of long distance shots create a sense of distance and difference, framing these villagers within a landscape and culture completely alien from the enclosed safe space of the tourist bus. A shot-reverse-shot sequence as both parties carefully observe each other from different sides of the glass window creates the sense of two gazes, two cultures, and two worlds that will never meet, being utterly divided by religion, corporeal difference, language, and national-economic status. With Richard’s narrative, Iñárritu invites the audience to experience the tourists’ sense of unease in the
“real Morocco,” away from the comforts of tourist safaris and restaurants. Manipulating audiences’ post-9/11 anxiety toward Islam with shots of dusty mosques and watchful veiled women, Iñárritu depicts a landscape utterly alien and hostile to so-called “Western” sensibilities. Though Iñárritu is critical of the “Othering” gaze of the West (he includes an ugly scene where selfish and paranoid tourists insist on leaving Richard and his wife behind), he is also careful to depict the tourists’ point of view and impart a sense of their anxieties.

Richard’s experience of Morocco contrasts sharply with Yussef’s narrative. The film’s portrayal of Yussef amidst the simple intimacies of his adolescence and home life, allows audiences to seamlessly inhabit the landscape and lifestyle of his Moroccan family. Moroccan life is not exoticised or made to appear in any way “unheimlich” – Yussef’s story is not self-consciously presented or exposed as if to an audience unfamiliar with Moroccan culture. Instead, we witness accessible universal themes common in a typical bildungsroman such as Yussef and Ahmed’s brotherly rivalry for their father’s approval. Unless attempting to capture the visual expanse of the Moroccan landscape, Iñárritu also avoids long-distance shots of the boys – a cinematographic technique which tends to objectify the subject that is being captured on-screen by framing him/her against a pictorial background. Instead, Iñárritu primarily employs close-ups and medium distance shots in order to encourage greater emotional empathy with Yussef. Yussef’s perspective of Morocco then acts as a counter-point to this narrative of distrust by familiarizing audiences with the very people that Richard’s story alienates.

Freud’s “unheimlich” (literally translated as “un-homely”) or uncanny, explains a sense of unease felt when an object, scene or situation is considered alien but somehow familiar. What results is an emotional rejection of the subject due to the paradoxical nature of feeling at home with and at the same time alienated or disgusted by it. *The Uncanny* by Sigmund Freud, 2003.
Yussef and Richard’s disparate gazes provoke audiences to both alienate and become part of the Moroccan people, in turn aligning our gaze with a young Moroccan protagonist and then encouraging us to observe the same culture from an objectifying distance. Iñárritu forces audiences to occupy positions on either side of the glass window, urging us to identify with both the Moroccan boys and the American and European tourists. Even though the ensemble structure opposes these disparate stories, they share a similar purpose within the film’s larger ideology. By pushing audiences to occupy multiple and even contesting positions, Iñárritu forces audiences to adopt the different perspectives of various protagonists at opposing ends of a socio-political situation. In doing so, the divides between who is Self and who is Other, becomes far less clear cut. *Babel* questions the validity of divisive national and racial boundaries – it critiques the policing of national borders in Amelia’s story, inter-national injustice in Yussef’s story, and cultural narrow-mindedness in Richard’s. But even so, the film still recognizes the continuing significance of national/cultural distinction and is diligent in portraying these rooted solidarities.

Nevertheless, the film does not stop short of imagining the humanist dream. At the centre of these different characters lies the common denominator of humanity and human feeling. The ensemble structure allows for a multiplicity of the gaze and reflects a cosmopolitan effort to acknowledge the sentience or “humanness” of all characters of whatever national, religious, or ethnic solidarity – the crux of traditional cosmopolitanism’s universalist-humanist ethic. Though Iñárritu makes the distinctions

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37 As mentioned in Chapter 1, I am careful to point out that the definition of humanism used in this paper conforms to the over-arching, idealized sentiments of brotherly love as used by Kant, as opposed to its more recent post-structuralist reconfigurations.
between his narratives clear, it must also be remembered that he also attempts to connect them – whether through graphic/sound matches and crossovers, or a larger unifying theme. Toward the last quarter of the film, Iñárritu begins to draw the stories together. The editing transitions between the narrative branches shift, recreating the connectivity of the film’s initial scenes, but with far greater frequency and significance. Iñárritu uses a lingering soundtrack to link the images of the separate narratives. The notes of a Mexican guitar follows through from the scene of Amelia’s deportation back to Mexico, to the image of Ahmed’s body being carried away as Yussef looks on. The tempo of the music shifts to the trills of a Moroccan instrument as Yussef recalls them standing in the wind with outstretched arms. This tune then carries into Susan and Richard’s narrative as medical evacuation arrives and takes them to a hospital. The plot also becomes less action oriented and the film’s tone shifts toward the pensive and melancholic through the use of still montage shots (of deserted streets and emptied wedding grounds for instance), played against mournful music. In these moments of emotional retrospection, the characters are drawn closer together in their shared experience of pain. Amelia, who had made the U.S. her home for sixteen years, faces deportation. Yussef sees his brother killed because of his own foolishness. Richard breaks down after his wife finally receives medical aid, and Chieko at last admits to her fears of loneliness and rejection. In these moments of emotional catharsis, Iñárritu draws the narratives together through subtle changes in the editing technique, cinematography and soundtrack. He connects the characters under the over-arching humanist theme of shared human pain and emotion. He suggests that it is indeed through the common realness of emotion that we might understand humankind’s shared existence. As the film draws to a close, Iñárritu suggests
that even amid the divisiveness of inter-national politics, there exists the possibility of something that transcends national/cultural solidarities – the bareness of human emotion, intrinsic and common to all humanity. This is the unifying philosophy of the film’s four stories.

Chieko’s story in particular, with its powerful themes of loneliness and alienation, acts as the emotional anchor which structurally joins the other stories in a shared human connection. Of the four stories, Chieko’s seems the most thematically separate from the others – being the only one that does not directly comment on the theme of political and economic injustice between nations. Yet, hers is the vehicle which evokes audience’s empathy and intimacy with the human experience – it opens the viewers’ senses to a sentimentality and emotional relationship that transcends national, cultural, and linguistic borders. Being deaf-mute, Chieko’s story is not told through language and dialogue but through actions and expressions. Her emotional state is often inferred through an appeal to our understanding of human emotion which transcends the borders of language, culture and nationality – the type of universal humanism that Kant argues does exist via shared human experiences amid divisive solidarities. The alienation she feels, trapped in a world of silence, is shared by the spectator in a club scene where the soundtrack cuts abruptly between pounding music and muted silence. We empathize with her bewilderment as people around her engage with this inaccessible inaudible world. We begin to understand her desperate loneliness and need for human interaction when she bares herself before Detective Kenji in the sheer hope of making human contact. Despite being set in the meticulously depicted cultural space of urban Tokyo, Chieko’s experience is one which transcends the divides of nation, culture and language. Indeed, her alienation critiques the
medium of language itself, demanding an interaction between people at the most pure level of feeling. Iñárritu uses Chieko’s character to elicit the universal humanist sentiment which acts as the common thread between all four narrative strands. Hers is the narrative which closes the film in a haunting finale which thematically sums up *Babel*’s philosophical aesthetic within a single shot. As Chieko clings to her father on the balcony of their apartment, the camera pulls slowly away to encompass the city of Tokyo stretched out behind them. As their figures dwindle into the flickering lights of Tokyo’s vast cityscape, the spectator is given the strong sense that hers is but one of billions of intimate and deeply-felt stories shared by a global community of human beings. At this moment, the ensemble narratives of the film come together in structural and thematic unity. As the character whose social alienation is almost complete, Chieko’s story functions as the anchor which ties the narratives together in a shared experience of emotional pain. The vulnerability of the human spirit is made visual in this scene – the nakedness of her body signifying the human experience in its barest form. The gesture of reaching out for her father’s hand resonates with the weight of all the other emotions of anger, despair, grief, and fear, which dominate the film’s other narratives.

Though it visually represents a moment of emotional catharsis and connection for Chieko and her father, this last scene is imbued with a deep sense of eternal loneliness. Even in the moment of Chieko and her father’s embrace, the camera pulls away from their diminishing figures to reveal their smallness and isolation amid a cold, vast cityscape. This shot depicts both deep connection and absolute alienation. The spectator, pulled away by the camera and forced to look on from an increasingly distanced position feels an ever-increasing separation. As the surrounding cityscape takes over the frame
and we see Chieko and her father isolated on the balcony of their high-rise diminishing from our view, we realize the largeness of the world and our solitude within it. Like Chieko, we are left with a longing for a deep and all-encompassing connectedness, but are also forced to realize that complete connection with an imagined human community is impossible. In this instance, a full sense of the Kantian “love of humanity” is expressed. The film’s longing for “perpetual peace” and a connection with all humanity is achingly felt. Because this is never achieved, the film encapsulates the very meaning of the struggle for cosmopolitanism.

Let me return to the words of Judith Butler, whose concept on the unachievable universal ideal is central to my construction of “discursive cosmopolitanism.” She writes,

> The universal is always culturally articulated, and that the complex process of learning how to read that claim is not something any of us can do outside of the difficult processes of cultural translation…The movement of that unanticipated transformation establishes the universal as that which is yet to be achieved and which, in order to resist domestication, may never be fully or finally achievable. (1995: 131)

The open-endedness of *Babel’s* final scene articulates that elusive “discursive cosmopolitan ethic” which has been the central preoccupation of this project. Even though Iñárritu attempts to imagine a universal human connection by paring down human experience to their raw emotions, this in itself is only the most fleeting and intangible of human connection. A fuller, concrete version of how this intangible unifying “spirit of all humanity” might be put in practice is never fully articulated. Although *Babel* traces the common human spirit across the globe, it also realizes the impossibility of ignoring a history of geopolitical and cultural divides – the borders of which will always be policed and defended even in a globalizing age. Even the film itself relishes in depicting these rich, diverse cultural landscapes. *Babel* constantly treads between the particular and the
universal by paying attention to cultural particularities even whilst imagining a greater humanity. Hence, Babel demonstrates how absolutism of the universalist humanist dream, though desirable, can never and should never be achieved. It manages to articulate cosmopolitanism’s desire for a global humanist community, whilst keeping in balance rooted solidarities. By not attempting to solve the paradox, Babel indeed transcends it.

Babel distinguishes itself from Crash, Letters from Iwo Jima, and Syriana in this way. Although Babel and Crash appear to share a superficial thematic and structural similarity, they differ in their larger thematic purpose and ideological outlook. Whilst Crash simplifies the complexities of racism into trite liberalist platitudes, Babel attempts to maintain the complexity of the debate through its structural open-endedness and thematic ambiguity. Even as global connections are made and a sense of the universal spirit is imagined, the realities of economic, political and cultural divides remain as determining factors in the lived experience. Babel manages to keep this open-endedness and constant negotiation in balance though the ensemble structure. Babel also differs from Letters from Iwo Jima in this respect. Letters attempts to articulate other cultures by borrowing from a language of “universal” values which does not exist. Babel on the other hand, leaves the humanist vision unfinished and unreachable, as we have seen in the final scene. Yet unlike Syriana, the impossibility of the universal humanist ideal does not stifle Babel’s desire for the cosmopolitan dream. Iñárritu still imagines a larger connectedness through the shared experience of emotion which intertwines his various characters.

Speaking about his ensemble narratives, Iñárritu himself sums up this vision, “…each of them is different, but combined in a way that makes a character and uniqueness in each one. The palettes mark every character, but the difficult thing was not
to separate them; it was to give them a character but at the same time there's a congress of all of them” (http://movies.ign.com/articles/742/742071p2.html). *Babel* works towards a discursive position of constant negotiation where the ethics of cosmopolitanism are put in practice, but its dangerous goals of universal humanism remain rightfully unrealized. The very ungroundedness and futility of Kantian “love for humanity” is what establishes this film as a truly “discursive cosmopolitan” text.
Conclusion: Hope and the Future of Critical Theory

The debates of cosmopolitanism I have raised thus far are discussions about the principles of global justice, and the question of the universality of the values raised by these principles. I have questioned the meaning of a desire for a community larger than nation, and have realized the importance of hoping for such a community even though it may never materialize. These debates are important. However, they still do not address an objection to traditional cosmopolitanism that may still persist – that although the Kantian cosmopolitan ideal is acceptable in theory, it will never be realized and those who desire it are naïve wishful thinkers who “fail to take seriously facts about the world which make the achievement of this state impossible or unlikely” (McKinnon, 2006: 236). Such objections are typical of most ideal-oriented political projects.

Catriona McKinnon critiques such objections (which she calls “hard-nosed”) by arguing that the feasibility of success should not determine the capacity to hope for a better world.

By being hard-nosed with respect to the cosmopolitan ideal, the objector deprives herself of the motivation to act in the way demanded by the cosmopolitan requirement…A hard-nosed objector genuinely committed to it must not divest herself of the motivation to pursue it by judging it to be impossible (2006: 247).

Imagining this cosmopolitan ideal within a new critical theory should not be considered futile. Yet, blindly reaching for an impossible ideal is also not what this project advocates. This dissertation deliberately runs against pessimism towards global justice without ignoring the continuing and often violent borders between nations, cultures, and
other solidarities. In this way, the concept of discursive cosmopolitanism relieves the burden of actualization leveled at the traditional cosmopolitanism.

Rather than being focused on the probability of success, what is more important is realizing the potential for cosmopolitan theory to change views on the future of the world. New critical theory, as Drucilla Cornell argues, should take seriously the “role theory can or should play in envisioning and actualizing a more just world” (2008: 1). The critical theory of the Frankfurt School, she explains, was “inspired by Marxism and the effort to move beyond the inequalities of advanced capitalism to a socialist society” (1). Our knowledge is inevitably linked to the symbolic forms with which we perceive and represent our world; they are both conceptual facilitators and limitations of how we know and relate to it (Cornell, 2008:1). Because critical theory is the framework through which these symbolic forms are understood, it determines how they are received. As this thesis has demonstrated, popular cinema is one such symbolic representation of world views. The way we see the world and hence, what we do and hope for it, is determined by how we are acquainted with this world on-screen. New critical theory for cinema should therefore bring to the foreground the ethical philosophies of global justice. Just as the auteur theory established a standard for directors whose work exhibited a consistent artistic flair and trademark, cosmopolitan theory creates a standard of humanist ethics in cinema, looking at films according to how much they express a desire for global justice, and how close they come to achieving it.

This was what my dissertation hopes to have illustrated. After a discussion of the history and politics of cosmopolitan theory, the initial chapters re-configured new cosmopolitanism as a discursive and never-ending process and established it as a
framework through which texts can be read in terms of their ethical ideologies. An analysis of post-9/11 political hyperlink dramas then illustrated how this was possible. Fundamental to the cosmopolitan project was a basic responsibility toward a genuine struggle for justice. *Crash* least exemplified this ethic for lacking a deeper interest in critiquing systemic structures of racial inequality despite presenting a veneer of political liberalism. Even if the ethical impetus of cosmopolitanism was kept in mind, films such as *Letters from Iwo Jima* problematically interpreted diverse cultures through its own, narrow cultural lens. *Letters* made the flawed assumption that American interpretations of patriotism and masculinity were universal, using them to represent a Japanese narrative. The chapter demonstrated how these so-called “universal” ideologies were inevitably culturally located. *Syriana* was then discussed as an example of a film which was able to maintain openness towards various world-views without drawing upon “universal” ideologies. Fulfilling a key aspect of the cosmopolitan project, *Syriana* used its ensemble structure to depict multiple perspectives from opposing sides of the oil tussle in the Middle-East with all-round objectivity. Despite its multi-perspetivism however, *Syriana* was lacking in one crucial aspect. In its pessimistic critique of human greed and corruption, it did not imagine a greater hope for humanity – a critical endeavor of the cosmopolitan project. *Babel* on the other hand, was able to keep both ideologies in mind through an act of continuous discursivity. Whilst the film recognized cultural and national solidarities, it also harboured a desire for global justice and a common humanity. Both impulses were exemplified through the film’s ensemble narrative structure which kept in view a realization of difference as well as an elusive human connectedness. With *Babel*, I demonstrated how cosmopolitanism was actually a continuous project rather than
an endpoint caught between two competing ideologies. This view of cosmopolitanism grasps the idea of continued effort and self-critical openendedness whilst avoiding the problems with both ideological dead-ends. Rather, the re-invention of “cosmopolitanism” as a process of continuous discursivity allowed for a comprehensive reading of the post-9/11 ensemble film and offered a new way of approaching cinema in terms of its social and national politics.

Because of the scope of this dissertation, I have restricted my study of discursive cosmopolitan cinema to Hollywood, in particular, to political ensemble dramas released after 9/11. Hence, I have only just begun to unwrap the potential within this new theory for an ethical reading of film. The next logical step when considering cosmopolitan film would be to look at other cinemas which discuss issues of inter-national or trans-cultural interaction. This would include diasporic films and cinemas from other cultural and national backgrounds. Looking at such cinemas may add yet another dimension to this new area in film theory, or further nuance it. It may reveal significant differences between the cosmopolitan sentiments of various cultures. Reading a text for its cosmopolitan potential is also an exercise not limited to cinema. Scholars of literature, drama, or visual art may also translate this concept of discursive cosmopolitanism into a textual reading for another medium. After all, the cosmopolitan project is not bounded by form but finds expression wherever art and socio-political activism come together.
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