

Topic Page: [Cinema](#)

Definition: **Cinema** from *The SAGE Glossary of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*

A term that is sometimes used interchangeably with *film* and *the movies* but also has a larger scope. *Cinema* (or *the cinema*) generally refers collectively to the entire range of activities or products related to the motion picture industry and the academic or cultural practices encompassing all movies and not just an individual film. The cinema is thought to have the characteristics of a commodity, a form of communication, a spectacle, a special effect, a tool of ideology, or an apparatus that creates the modern subject. For more information, see Cubitt (2004) in the bibliography.

See also

Film



Image from: [Charlie Chaplin in his classic hobo costume in... in Encyclopedia of Homelessness](#)

Summary Article: **Cinema**

From *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*

With performances that can be simultaneously presented before millions around the world, cinema is a truly global entertainment medium. The ticketed screening of ten Lumière shorts at the Grand Café of Paris on December 28, 1895, is widely regarded as the birth of cinema, but the history of the medium is more complicated than this singular event implies. A series of discrete yet connected inventions led up to the moment: optical toys from the 17th-century magic lantern to 19th-century image-animating devices like the Thaumatrope and Zoetrope; development of still photography in the 1820s and 1830s by innovators like Nicéphore Niepce, William Henry Fox Talbot, and

Louis Daguerre, and the subsequent experiments of Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey aimed at capturing movement; George Eastman's evolving film stocks; Thomas Edison and William Kennedy Dickinson's search for motion picture cameras and projection systems (Kinetograph and Kinetoscope); and Auguste and Louis Lumière's combination of recording and projecting functions in the Cinématographe. This standard account presents cinema as a modern, Western technology of representation as well as its genesis as, in the main, a French-American event.

At first glance, this history seems accurate; yet two distinct complications, pertaining to the qualifiers “modern” and “Western,” develop when we think of cinema in a global frame. Even if we acknowledge the centrality of capital to what we call the modern era, it is difficult to shore up the hypothesis of a unitary, universal modernity: Cultural differences will ensure divergent local experiences, generating a multiplicity of concurrent modernities. To argue otherwise will require we accept some version of a “stages” theory of modernization, according to which modernity emerges first in western Europe, then in the United States, and then gradually spreads to the rest of the world. In such a Eurocentric framework, the magic lantern or the Zoetrope can be absorbed easily into the history of cinema as a modern medium, but non-Western precinematic entertainment and narrative forms, such as Chinese shadow puppetry and Indian narrative scroll paintings, will produce cognitive hiccups and get jettisoned as premodern.

Limitations of the Hollywood and European Art Cinema Dichotomy

The bulk of scholarly and journalistic writings bolstered media histories and geographies in which Hollywood commercial cinema and, later, European art cinema get ensconced as the global benchmarks of two contrary modes. Overly distinguished by their imputed adherence to two polarized sets of conventions (commercial cinema's erasure of the means of production in the interest of taut, pleasurable, "slice of real life" narratives, in contrast to art cinema's reflexive, formally radical, discursively ambiguous and intellectually stimulating works), these two ideal types are then viewed as spawning their respective emulators. If Hollywood remains the undisputed model for various commercial film industries, their "derivative" status now obsessively reiterated by epithets like Bollywood and Nollywood, then more radical European formations such as Soviet Revolutionary Cinema or the French New Wave are celebrated as inspirations for Brazilian Cinema Novo or Taiwanese New Cinema.

The point is not to deny the global hegemony of Hollywood or the far-flung influences of Italian Neorealism and the French Nouvelle Vague. The point, rather, is to press for more global accounts of world cinema. If Hollywood principles of verisimilitude, continuity editing, and narrative economy are taken to be the universal standards, then Hong Kong martial arts and ghost genres or Indian melodramas with their epic digressions and musical numbers seem idiosyncratic, only partially evolved: These huge industries remain oddly marginal. What, then, is the place in global cinema of the Hindi film *Awara* (1951), now widely considered to be the most watched film in the world? How do we appreciate the penetration of Hollywood action films by martial arts gestures—a development of which the *Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003) may only be the most legible signpost? Even today, as Hollywood is entering all kinds of transnational collaborations, the moniker "world cinema" routinely refers to a smorgasbord of non-Hollywood cinemas (thereby rivaling the absurdity of the category "world music"). Where and what is Hollywood, exactly? In what sense is *Moulin Rouge* (2001), a film about a group of fin de siècle Parisian bohemians producing a stage show set in India, co-produced by Twentieth Century Fox (United States), Angel Studios (Britain), and Bazmark Films (Australia-United States), with British, Australian, and Colombian-American lead actors, and directed by the Australian filmmaker Baz Luhrmann, a Hollywood film?

Multiple Models of Global Cinema

Reflections such as these index the insufficiency of established paradigms and underscore a need to acknowledge, document, and analyze the multiple folds along which cinema has developed as a global medium. Current research is moving in this direction, going beyond both West-centric myopia and the stale question of "influences," and postcolonial critiques of cultural imperialism and orientalist representation, to record the global efflorescence of cinematic genres and styles, circuits, and institutions. The signs of such a paradigmatic shift are increasingly more common. Thus, Sean Cubitt places the Marathi pioneer D. G. Phalke alongside the French Georges Méliès as progenitors of special effects; Toby Miller and colleagues investigate the global constitution of Hollywood; Corey Creekmur questions the undisputed preeminence of Hollywood and "provincializes" it via a rethinking of the musical genre in the light of Indian cinema. Peter Bloom and Priva Jaikumar record not only the colonialist agenda of French and British "empire cinemas" but also their tremendous productivity in forging modern globalities. Brian Larkin, Morris and colleagues, and Sudha Rajagopalan track the global reach of non-Hollywood cinemas (Hindi films in Nigeria and the Soviet Union, Hong Kong films in South India and Southeast Asia, and so on), while Hamid Naficy and Bhaskar Sarkar, among others, map—in a variety of contexts and frameworks, from the hybrid, "accented" nature of diasporic and transnational

independent films to the critique of modernist “foundational fictions” in terms of an epic melodramatic mode—the material relations and affective affinities among communities of a mutating global South.

Such approaches extend and deepen our understanding of the global in global cinema, while helping to globalize film scholarship. At the same time, they explore and often reproduce tensions between the global and the local, now with twists pertaining to the medium. Thus, for instance, what is known as Mexican cinema is a formation at once shaped by local concerns and translocal forces. In its professed golden age between the 1930s and the 1950s, typified in the works of Emilio Fernández and his cinematographer Gabriel Figueroa, this national cinema already combined the contradictions of Mexican society and local settings (haciendas, chapels, dancehalls, and brothels) with Hollywood-style plot structures and drew inspiration from Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's use of Mexican folkloric idioms in *Que Viva Mexico* (1932). More recently, internationally recognized directors such as Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro González Iñárritu and Guillermo del Toro stage the incongruities of being Mexican filmmakers in the era of global co-productions and expanding transborder audiences: films such as *Amores Perros* (2000) and *Y tu mamá también* (2001) perform an “innate” Mexican-ness even as they tap into the vitality of emerging transnational markets, lifestyles, and sensibilities.

The Persistence of National Cinema

Here, we encounter one of the peculiarities of contemporary cinema: Even as the national is eclipsed by transnational collectivities, institutions, and channels, the rubric of “national cinema” persists. A qualifier derived from modernity's archetypal unit of political organization, the national came to denote cinema—like literature, art, and culture before it—as something of a collective patrimony. The invocation of the national, even when cinema existed in an uneasy relation to nationalist/statist ideologies, took on a performative role, seeking to institute a shared ethos and identity through reiteration. The linguistic basis of such presumed affiliations, reflected in familiar categories such as Italian Cinema or Spanish Cinema, is complicated by intranational linguistic differences (e.g., Italian auteur Pier Paolo Pasolini's use of Friulian) or competing nationalisms (e.g., Catalan and Basque cinemas in relation to Spanish cinema). And in a multilingual society such as India, “national cinema” amounts to an awkward bundling of multiple “regional” film industries corresponding to distinct languages: Bengali, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telegu, to name the most prominent. Despite all the contradictions at both subnational and supranational levels, this not-so-vestigial category continues to frame films in international circuits: Thus, Korean cinema enjoys a renaissance, a Thai filmmaker wins at Cannes, and so on.

Regional Cinema

In many ways, the lesson of cinema is the impossibility of sustaining any self-evident integrity of categories like the local and the global, or of related designations of the national, microregional (Bhojpuri, Catalan) or macroregional (East Asian, European) kind. Consider, for instance, cinema of the Middle East: How does it relate to cognate cinematic formations—Persian, Israeli, Arab, Maghrebi, Egyptian, or Beur? All the same, as long as these categories are not allowed to become immutable and sacrosanct, they remain useful heuristics encapsulating complex histories and geographies. They represent multiple acts of worldmaking that overlap, seep into, and jostle with each other, at once fracturing and thickening our understanding of world cinema.

Realism and Social Critique

That cinema conjures up entire worlds in fantastic genres (the historical epic and science fiction) is a

commonplace. What remains less recognized is the role of more prosaic genres (family melodrama, romantic comedy) in shaping social institutions, modes of behavior and collective futures—indeed, the very idea of the human. Debates about cinematic realism often proceed from an assumption that the medium's role is to “reflect” reality, even as proponents of realist aesthetics routinely project what they would like reality to be. The history of world cinema—of its various “movements,” including the so-called radical modernisms—is full of struggles to shape reality. But this agonistic history does not imply a simple antagonism between cinema and capital: In fact, the medium has been a crucial component of the uneven experience of capitalist modernity. Not only has cinema recorded (i.e., reflected) the shock of the modern, but it has also reordered spatiotemporal relations and fabricated novel media ecologies. Miriam Hansen argued that locally grounded “vernacular modernisms” were as responsible as the various avant-garde movements in producing modern subjectivities, socialities, and worldviews, effectively working in tandem with the global processes of industrialization, urbanization, and migration. The medium has induced sensations of mobility and shaped aspirations; fostered connectivity around cinephilia and cosmopolitan ideals; generated spirited cultural interventions on behalf of social justice and equity; and served as the site for geopolitical realignments from imperial cinema to Third Cinema (a paradigm proposed in the 1960s as a politicized alternative to both neoimperialist commercial cinemas and European “art cinema”). Although it is necessary to reveal, by means of careful materialist-ideological critique, mainstream cinema's role in the reproduction of the relations of global production, it is also important to acknowledge its considerable generative capacities.

Cinema as a Mirror of Globalities

Not the least of these capacities is the ability to project and materialize entire lifeworlds: in a profound sense, cinema is constitutive of modern globalities. Many social scientists still overlook this aspect, reducing films to epiphenomenal documents of a reality “out there.” In actuality, cinema is directly imbricated in global mechanisms and patterns of transformation. Thus, cultural policies have undergone momentous shifts within a neoliberal ecumene. Both Luisela Alvaray and Cristina Venegas documented a new regionalism in Latin America in the wake of trade pacts and alliances such as North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and MERCOSUR: Regional collaborations such as Programa Ibermedia and RECAM mark the emergence of new media geographies. In a markedly different context, Mette Hjort analyzes how the cinema of Denmark, a “small nation,” sought to overcome its limited market and cultural prestige with a two-prong strategy: posing the concept of “heritage” as something universal, imbued with broad humanist appeal (now taken up by the United Nations with respect to culture in general); and developing the aesthetically rigorous Dogme 95 film movement as a means of energizing world cinema.

The Impact of New Technologies

It is not as if cinema's material networks have become global only in this much-hyped era of globalization. The planetary circulation of Lumière, Edison, and Pathé film crews and shorts in the early years of cinema; international film festivals from the 1930s; “runaway productions” shot in foreign locales from the 1960s; connections fostered by film schools such as the one at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and Cuba's famed ICAIC (the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industry): These are only a few significant moments in the medium's history that counter such presentism. Nonetheless, several contemporary developments expand and intensify cinema's global dimension. Central among these is the advent of digital media technologies, formats, and systems, revolutionizing all aspects of cinema and prompting hyperbole about “the death of cinema.” The use

of digital editing software, digital video and high-definition technologies, CGI (computer-generated imagery); outsourcing of postproduction work to multiple locations dispersed across the planet (creating translocal, “virtual” studios); increasing standardization of theatrical exhibition in terms of multiplexes with similar architectures, game arcades and concession stands, Dolby or THX sound systems, and digital projection; the proliferation of three-dimensional and IMAX screens to compete with popular immersive technologies like video games; the Internet purveying new platforms for experimental and short films and inducing the radical reorganization of commercial distribution in electronic formats directly to home and handheld devices; Web 2.0 intensifying the romance with interactivity and enabling user-generated media: these emerging media assemblages are surely marking the end of cinema as we know it.

At the same time, the new technologies and conduits have exacerbated illegal copying and distribution of media—piracy—underscoring the need for more stringent regimes of regulation. The World Trade Organization's global agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) seeks to achieve this, but global compliance runs into problems of competing interests and sovereignties at national and local levels. What is a problem for media industries is, on the other hand, a form of cultural activism for their critics, who decry the former's unmitigated greed for profits and extol the entrepreneurial pirates' role in expanding access to, and informally archiving, films. The shacks and carts of Beijing, Cairo, or Kuala Lumpur that offer a cornucopia of world cinema, sometimes even hard-to-find titles, mark the vibrant and irrepressible underbelly of globalization.

Preserving World Cinema and Global Social Responsibility

Two other sets of contemporary initiatives, both focusing on cinema and seeking to promote global understanding and civil society values, are worth mentioning. The first springs from the turn of the century interest in restoring, preserving, and archiving significant works of world cinema. The second involves transnational documentary movements, which seek to record, bear witness to, and mobilize publics against social suffering—often perpetrated by the state. Working with nongovernmental organizations and institutions such as the World Social Forum and taking advantage of the new modes of dissemination, these cine-initiatives promoting social justice and human rights constitute a significant part of globalization “from below.” However, these emergent documentary archives also feed into a global frenzy for top-down humanitarian interventions: a tendency dramatically instantiated by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's recent Darfur Project. As the global community moves to adopt policies such as the United Nations doctrine of “Responsibility to Protect” (2005), cinema's role in furthering the cause of a global civil society—itself a deeply contested concept—remains ambiguous.

See also:

Academy Awards, Americanization, Artists, Civil Society, Global, Cultural Industries, Global Culture, Media, Globalization, Phenomenon of, McDonalidization, McWorld, Mumbai

Further Readings

- Alvaray, L. National, regional, and global: New waves of Latin American cinema. *Cinema Journal*, 47 : 48-65., .
- Bloom, P.(2008). *French colonial documentary: Mythologies of humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Creekmur, C.(2002). *Picturizing American cinema: Hindi film songs and the last days of genre*. In

- Wojcik, P. R. & Knight, A. (Eds.), Soundtrack available(pp. 375-406). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ďurovičová, N., & Newman, K. (Eds.).(2009). World cinemas, transnational perspectives. London: Routledge.
 - Hansen, M.(2009). Vernacular modernism: Tracking cinema on a global scale. In Durovicová, N. & Newman, K. (Eds.), World cinemas, transnational perspectives(pp. 287-313). London: Routledge.
 - Hjort, M.(2005). Small nation, global cinema: The new Danish cinema. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
 - Jaikumar, P.(2006). Cinema at the end of empire: A politics of transition in Britain and India. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
 - Larkin, B.(2008). Signal and noise: Media, infrastructure, and urban culture in Nigeria. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
 - Miller, T.Govil, N.Wang, M. R.Wang, T.(2008). Global Hollywood 2. London: British Film Institute.
 - Morris, M.,Leung Li, S.,Chan Ching-Kiu, S., & Sai-shing, Y. (Eds.).(2006). Hong Kong connections: Transnational imaginations in action cinema. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
 - Naficy, H.(2001). An accented cinema: Exilic and diasporic filmmaking. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
 - Pang, L.(2007). Cultural control and globalization in Asia: Copyright, piracy, and cinema. London: Routledge.
 - Rajagopalan, S.(2009). Indian films in Soviet cinemas: The culture of movie-going after Stalin. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
 - Sarkar, B.(2010). Epic melodrama, or cine-maps of the global south. In Burgoyne, R. (Ed.), The epic film in world culture(pp. 263-295). London: Routledge.
 - Sarkar, B., & Walker, J. (Eds.).(2009). Documentary testimonies: Global archives of suffering. London: Routledge.
 - Venegas, C.(2009). Thinking regionally: Singular in diversity and diverse in unity. In Holt, J. & Perren, A. (Eds.), Media industries: History, theory, and method(pp. 120-130). West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Sarkar, Bhaskar

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Sarkar, B., & Sarkar. (2012). Cinema. In H. K. Anheier, & M. Juergensmeyer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of global studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cinema>

 Copyright © 2012 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

 Copyright © 2012 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

APA

Sarkar, B., & Sarkar. (2012). Cinema. In H. K. Anheier, & M. Juergensmeyer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of global studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cinema>

Chicago

Sarkar, Bhaskar, and Sarkar. "Cinema." In *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, edited by Helmut K. Anheier, and Mark Juergensmeyer. Sage Publications, 2012. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cinema>

Harvard

Sarkar, B. and Sarkar. (2012). Cinema. In H.K. Anheier & M. Juergensmeyer (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of global studies*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cinema> [Accessed 18 September 2019].

MLA

Sarkar, Bhaskar, and Sarkar. "Cinema." *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*, edited by Helmut K. Anheier, and Mark Juergensmeyer, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2012. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/cinema>. Accessed 18 Sep. 2019.