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## Worlds of Difference: The Persistence of the Global in Postwar and Contemporary Cinemas

Riley Kelfer

Colby College, rkelfe22@colby.edu

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge Steve Wurtzler, whose course on international cinema provided the initial impulse for this paper, and whose encouragement greatly facilitated my work on this final draft.

# Worlds of Difference: The Persistence of the Global in Postwar and Contemporary Cinemas

Riley Kelfer

*Colby College*

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## Abstract

In his 1992 interview with Richard B. Woodward, Cormac McCarthy remarked on the inescapable intertextuality of writing: “The ugly fact is, books are made out of books. The novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written.” Applying McCarthy’s dictum to film, this essay surveys the persistence of global cinematic forms from Italian neorealism in the 1940s to the modern-day superhero blockbuster. Among the essay’s concerns are questions of genre, audience, and industry: What constitutes a national cinematic form? How do films create appeal? Synthesizing the work of theorists and critics like Cesare Zavattini, Bertolt Brecht, and Marcia Landy, I conclude that no film emerges *ex nihilo*. From Roberto Rossellini to the Russo brothers, cinema depends “for its life” on preexisting forms and movements.

*Keywords:* Cinema, Transnational, Blockbuster

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## Worlds of Difference

Last April, before the coronavirus pandemic brought the film industry to a standstill, theaters around the world had the pleasure of hosting one of the most lucrative movie events in history. Earning over \$800 million in domestic theaters and \$1.9 billion abroad, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) surpassed James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) as the highest-grossing worldwide

release of all time.<sup>1</sup> Besides charting new territory in the financial sector, *Endgame* incited a cultural frenzy, spawning memes, twitter battles, even “bathroom guides”—articles on how to optimize your viewing experience in the face of physiological need. Now, as theaters prepare to reopen, quarantine offers a chance to reflect on this apparent success. How do blockbusters like *Endgame* create global appeal? To what extent do profits and cultural impact correlate to innovation in the cinema? While we contemplate the future of entertainment in a post-pandemic world, the history of international cinema provides a vantage for understanding the patterns of form and allusion that make films “different.”

As capstone to the much-loved *Avengers* cinematic franchise, *Endgame* was marketed as a film the entire world could enjoy. It may seem ironic, then, how at the center of the film's theatrical release poster, stands Captain America (Fig. 1). Originally invented to combat Nazis in his early comic strips from the 1940s, America leads the charge in *Endgame*'s story of “assembling” against global evils. With a cast and crew dominated by Westerners, the global success of *Endgame* is a testament to the ability of the blockbuster to transcend national cinematic cultures and ideologies in the name of spectacle.

Long before *Endgame*, the *Avengers* franchise has served as an exemplar of the many related structures that give major blockbuster releases their global appeal. A cast of internationally recognized stars, for one, increases the accessibility of the *Avengers* cinematic universe across audience demographics. Older viewers may recognize Anthony Hopkins as Odin or Glenn Close in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, while stars like Chris Hemsworth and Paul Rudd attract a multitude of younger fans. *Endgame*, moreover, boasts the three highest-grossing actors in history: Samuel

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<sup>1</sup> As of March 2020. *Box Office Mojo*.

L. Jackson, Robert Downey, Jr., and Scarlett Johansson.<sup>2</sup> The notion of the “crossover event,” with *Endgame* and its precursor, *Infinity War* (2018), suggests not only the assemblage of popular fictional characters but the potential for near ubiquitous appeal through casting.



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<sup>2</sup> In fact, as of March 2020, 12 of the 25 all-time highest-grossing actors and actresses appeared in *Avengers: Endgame*. The list includes Bradley Cooper (5), Don Cheadle (8), Zoe Saldana (10), and Chris Pratt (11). *Box Office Mojo - People Index*.

**Fig. 1.** *Avengers: Endgame* Theatrical Release Poster for North America. In the Russian issue of this poster, Captain America is replaced by Iron Man in the center of the composition, and his iconic stars and stripes are hidden from view. *IMDb*.

Equally important to the franchise's success is its ability to attract die hard comics fans without ostracizing casual moviegoers. Not unlike the self-aware works of Jean-Luc Godard, Marvel films are cinematically multivalent and multilingual. In productions like *Endgame* and the *Spider-man* series, for example, shots and stretches of dialogue are often copied directly from the pages of Marvel comic books. The superfan is able to recognize these “easter eggs,” just as the cinephile engages with an intertextual film like *Breathless* (1960) or *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) differently from the average viewer. Finally—and most paradoxically—the *Avengers* films enthrall audiences less through their technical and narrative innovation than through their participation in tried and true cinematic languages. *Endgame*, as just one example, benefits from the conventions of multiple genres and national cinematic movements—including the combat scenes of American war films and the Italian epic, the galactic scale of the space opera, the “fly on the wall” camera techniques of direct cinema and the observational photography of cinema vérité, the musical conventions of the family melodrama, and more—which in their combination suggest a “new” genre. What might be termed the large-scale “American” superhero film is in fact an amalgam of national and international forms and personae—merely the latest development in an extensive history of national/international cinematic mutualism.

While Hollywood has developed styles that might be considered distinctly “American,” such as the western historical romance and the American family melodrama, directors have always drawn from cinematic forms around the world. International films began to gain traction in America with the unexpected success of Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (released in Italy

in 1945), which ran profitably for over a year in U.S. theatres beginning in 1946. Growing tired of the Classical Hollywood style, perhaps, American audiences in the postwar era were apparently receptive to unconventional narrative techniques and a greater degree of realism in movies. Of course, Rossellini's film did not reject the Hollywood blueprint in its entirety. American audiences were able to engage with *Rome, Open City* precisely because it operated on the same basic language of cinema to which the average viewer was accustomed in the works of Alfred Hitchcock, William Wyler, Frank Capra, and Orson Welles. Rossellini's use of continuity editing and music in familiar (i.e. melodramatic) ways, along with his depiction of heartless Nazis and recognizable Christian iconography, are all features of *Open City* with which American audiences in the 1940s and '50s could easily identify.

In its time, *Rome, Open City* was nevertheless an anomaly in the way it found such popular success as an Italian Neorealist film playing in American theatres. Later American arthouse productions like Robert Frank's *Pull My Daisy* (1959) drew on the conventions of the American Beat movement as well as the emerging language of an international art cinema but to little popular or financial success. Additionally, despite the eagerness of the New American Cinema Group to revise international cinematic culture—citing the “thematically superficial, temperamentally boring” work of the English Free Cinema and the French New Wave—many of their “new” impulses in fact derived from theorists abroad (First Statement). Their rejection of censorship in favor of personal expression, for instance, was expounded by critic/theorists like Francois Truffaut in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinema* years prior. International art films like Godard's *Breathless*, meanwhile, combined national cinematic textures in a way that was both groundbreaking for the medium and widely appealing to audiences. *Breathless* also introduced to art cinema an unprecedented level of self-referentiality. Michel's conspicuous imitations of Humphrey Bogart

invite the identification of American movie-lovers—any of whom would recognize the portrait of “Bogey” that Michel regards admiringly—with a film that is essentially *French*. These French critics-turned-filmmakers capitalized on international cinephilia by including references in their work to other films, genres, and cinematic traditions both popular and esoteric.

Drawing on the appeal of the American western genre film, the pejoratively termed “spaghetti western” is another example of how national forms become part of other countries’ cinematic identities. The quasi-historical aspects of the American frontier film—the dramatization of real-life conflicts between American settlers and Native Americans, for example—are reimagined in the Italian western as distinctly Italian conflicts. As Marcia Landy explains in “Which Way Is America?: Americanism and the Italian Western,” the Italian western is a format of its own national significance and ideological origin, one that invokes Italy’s antagonized process of unification in the face of the perceived superiority of Northern “intellectuals” over the Southerners associated with “primitivism, brutality, and brigandage” (42). The iconic works of Sergio Leone, for example, do not infringe upon the uniquely American mythology underlying Hollywood westerns, but rather adapt the western formula to address “regional antagonisms” (Landy 41). Other iterations of the form also explore these regional/national antagonisms, including Kim Jee-Woon’s *The Good, The Bad, The Weird* (2008), which reimagines Leone’s 1966 film in present-day Manchuria. Spectacle abounds in this Korean parody of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, which itself took the American western as its model. With Kim Jee-Woon, the result is a film that challenges not only the viewer’s conceptions of the western as a definitive genre but the notion of the “national” genre film itself through its palimpsestic adaptation of western tropes and set pieces.



Other films, like the playfully eclectic *Main Hoon Na* (Farah Khan, 2004), exploit or overuse the international language of cinema to humorous or alienating effects. Brimming with allusions to Western action movies and musical scores—“Ram turned out to be Ram-bo,” one character remarks, while Quincy Jones’ bossa-nova hook from *Austin Powers* (1997) rings out at the end of a comic scene—*Main Hoon Na* also owes inspiration to the martial arts, spy, and music-video genres. Similarly, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra’s *Rang de Basanti* (2006) delivers extravagant dance numbers typical of the Bollywood film alongside conventionally Western EDM and “popular” music. Soundtracks for Bollywood films, like A.R. Rahman’s score for *Rang de Basanti*, are often released weeks in advance of the film itself; as a result, the line between what is popular—the film or the music—becomes blurred. Because audiences watching the movie in theatres are already familiar with its musical content, they can identify with the film’s original music, if nothing else. In this way, the popular Bollywood film becomes intertextual merely by utilizing its own soundtrack, which is marketed and released as an independent piece of media. In spirit, this practice recalls the intertextuality popularized by European art films like Godard’s by making the soundtrack a kind of pre-release or teaser for the film. More recently, James Gunn’s *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) benefitted from this strategy when Hollywood Records released the film’s wildly successful—or highly marketable—compilation album to streaming services days before *Guardians* premiered worldwide.

The emergence of this kind of self-referentiality across national cinemas owes much to the work of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), whose writings on the tension of realism and aesthetics come to bear in cinematic traditions including Bollywood, the French New Wave, “spaghetti Westerns,” and the family melodramas of Douglas Sirk. Brecht writes of alienating viewers with conspicuously over-the-top visuals; however, this alienation can also occur in subtler

moments that call attention to the artifice of cinema, as the allusiveness of a Godard film demonstrates. In the films of German expatriate Douglas Sirk and later in Todd Haynes' *Far from Heaven* (2002), a garish mise-en-scene and non-naturalistic lighting fictionalize the world of the film, putting the real-world conflicts of their characters at odds with fantastical aesthetics. What Lalitha Gopalan writes of Indian cinema may be asserted with equal force of these American melodramas: instances of excess “cohere most intimately to popular cinema,” to films engineered for wider audiences (336). Bollywood, described by Gopalan as a “cinema of interruptions” or a “discontinuous form,” extends Brecht’s concept of alienation even further with the concept of the interval, the emphatic censorship of erotic themes and implications, and the protraction of extradiegetic segments like dance numbers (347).

According to Richard Dyer, the impulse toward spectacle in cinema is significant because it not only reveals real-world anxieties but aims to temporarily alleviate those concerns through escapism. In Dyer’s terms, the sensory and material excess of a Bollywood film like *Main Hoon Na* or *Rang de Basanti* may be construed as an artificial distraction from actual poverty and monotony in Indian society. More broadly, the anxieties identified by Dyer as “scarcity,” “dreariness,” “fragmentation,” and “exhaustion,” are universal concerns of the human experience (184). Thus, spectacle films, in the ways they provide an escape from these general anxieties, are likely to resonate with audiences of diverse social and national backgrounds. If *Endgame* is to be surpassed in gross worldwide income, after all, it will most probably be unseated by another “event film”—another spectacle that can claim, as eager fans of the Avengers have suggested in the past, the status of “the most ambitious crossover event in history.”<sup>3</sup> Fed by growing budgets for spectacular, graphically enhanced imagery, films like *Avatar* and *Endgame* suggest that the quality

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<sup>3</sup> See: *Business Insider*, “People are having lots of fun coming up with examples of more 'ambitious' crossover events than Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War*.” Web.

of a film's special effects—its potential to believably distort or escape the banality of the real world—is becoming an increasingly legitimate category in the cultural and economic appraisal of films.

The idea of cinema-as-event or cinema-as-spectacle finds its creative antithesis in the documentary impulse of uniquely national and “Third” cinemas. Rather than trying to captivate as many viewers as possible with the appeal of the “next big film,” the Third Cinema aims to “free the audience ‘from the mental colonization that Hollywood tries to impose on its audiences’” (Massood 24). Central to the vocabulary of the Third Cinema film is the idea of “neocolonialism,” or the imperial resonance of Western cultures in decolonized nations and national products. Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino build on Cesare Zavattini's imagination of cinema as a national or transnational “moral impulse” in the way they envision film as a communicator of moral imperatives and a liberator of colonized minds (Zavattini 53). In Solanas and Gettino's conception of a “Third Cinema,” both the camera, handled as if it were a “gun,” and the screening event, impromptu and clandestine rather than theatrical, are tailored to national revolutionary impulses, but have the potential to become tools of an “international guerrilla cinema” (61).

Films like Santiago Alvarez' *Now* (1965), California Newsreel's *Off the Pig* (1968), and Jorge Sanjines' *Blood of the Condor* (1969) display a similar coexistence of national and transnational impulses. Sanjines famously took his film and screening equipment to rural Quechua villages in Bolivia, where his team engaged conversations about the film with villagers before and after screenings. Cinema, with Sanjines, became a means of educating people about current political tensions. The final shot of Sanjines' film, however, appears to extend the spirit of revolution beyond just his home country: depicting many disembodied arms as they thrust their rifles into the air, the image gives the idea of revolution an international urgency. To a similar

effect, Alvarez' film concludes with staccato machine gun fire as bullet holes appear on screen to spell, simply, "NOW." While the imagery of *Now* portrays distinctly American hypocrisy in the way it equates the oppression of African Americans during the Civil Rights era to that of Cuba by the American government, the ambiguity of the single word extends the film's significance beyond its own historical circumstances. It simply calls for action by the oppressed in the manner of Solanas and Gettino's vision. The rapid flashing of California Newsreel's logo in *Off the Pig* visually and sonically imitates Alvarez' final shot in *Now* in preface to a documentary film showcasing the protests of the Black Panther Party. Together, the films of Sanjines, Alvarez, and California Newsreel metaphorize both the exigency and the ubiquity of the revolutionary desire to "decolonize" the mind as well as the nation in an era of lingering ideological imperialism.

Paula Massood contends that filmmakers like Charles Burnett continue the "political and aesthetic practices of Third Cinema" by using what she calls a more "subtle" or "poetic realism" (25). Burnett's portrayal of the Los Angeles Watts-area in *Killer of Sheep* (1978) creates a locational ambiguity not unlike that of Sanjines' and Alvarez' films by discarding traditional signals of place and time. Though residents of the ghetto may recognize Watts, the general lack of indicators as to where the story takes place implies that the injustices affecting his community are also affecting suburban communities around the United States. In its tacit depiction of community politics and social injustices, *Killer of Sheep* also bears a resemblance to Agnes Varda's *Black Panthers* (1968), which portrays the ethos of the Black Panther Party more implicitly than California Newsreel's production. The title of the Newsreel film, "Off the Pig," refers to one of the Black Panther Party's demonstrative tools, a call and response chant that connotes action rather than political discourse. Varda's title, by contrast, announces her focus on the members of the

movement and portrays their politics as quotidian and lived-in rather than sporadic and performative.

Though Varda's film explores a political movement in the United States, her employment of polyphony—the way that she films multiple members of the party speaking casually about its influence on their personal lives—more closely resembles international documentaries like *Cairo as Seen by Chahine* (Youssef Chahine, 1991). Ironically, the Cairo of Chahine's documentary is not explicitly “seen” only by its director; rather, various eyeline matches and close-ups of passersby suggest Cairo is a rapidly globalizing city that inundates its many inhabitants with Westernized products and advertisements. Chahine's polyphonic or multiperspective depiction of Cairo speaks to the growing permeability of borders to cultural influences and media in the late 20th century. Around the globe, improved infrastructure for the transfer and reproduction of information and media has enabled the burgeoning of a transnational media culture through the globalization of commerce. Necessarily, as Chahine's film points out, networks of exchange have also allowed for the infiltration and dominance of certain cultural ideologies over others in the global landscape.

On the one hand, the privatization of the movie industry has had a distinctly positive effect on the emergence of national film movements, and the freedom to create media without sanctions or direction from the government has similarly allowed national cinemas to become imbued with a nation's distinct cultural values and interests. For example, in “Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy,” Brian Larkin points out how the infrastructure of piracy has permitted the development of a Nigerian cinema that relies almost exclusively on direct-to-video formats: “this new industry has pioneered new film genres and generated an entirely novel mode of reproduction and distribution that uses the capital, equipment,

personnel, and distribution networks of pirate media” (290). The result, in Nigeria, is a “legitimate media form . . . [that] could not exist without its illegitimate double” in pirated media (290). Unlike filmmakers working under the supervision of major production companies, Nigerian filmmakers have more freedom to create the films they want on whatever timescale they prefer. According to Jamie Meltzer’s documentary *Welcome to Nollywood* (2007), these filmmakers are responsible for a combined total of 2,400 new productions per year. While many of these films utilize the conventions of American action and drama films, the Nollywood film—partly because of the impulse to create so quickly and partly because of the methods of piracy that degrade images and distort sound—has nevertheless become a uniquely Nigerian form of media.

On the other hand, in places where the film industry remains under the scrutiny of the government or production conglomerates, structures that limit creative freedoms have precipitated the development of new cinematic forms and idiosyncrasies. In Bollywood films, for instance, the censorship of anything remotely erotic adds to a recognizably “Bollywood” aesthetic of discontinuity. Feelings that cannot be expressed sexually/romantically in the Indian Cinema are accounted for in extradiegetic flights of fancy. The dance sequences of Khan’s *Main Hoon Na*, especially, are exuberant parentheticals that extend the escapism of the spectacle film to the characters within that film. Similarly, in Third Cinema, the technical and aesthetic motifs of Italian Neorealist filmmaking—handheld cameras, the use of natural lighting, shooting on site—are used to the advantage of a ‘guerrilla’ filmmaking impulse and contribute to a memorable aesthetic in Third cinema.

Moving into the present day, international movie-events like *Avengers: Endgame* are only the more conspicuous case studies in the conflation of the national and the trans/international in contemporary cinema. The revision and repetition of national forms by other filmmakers in

different national, cultural, and cinematic contexts has not lost any traction since the postwar era. Rather, in a world that mingles culture, information, and people on an ever-increasing scale, art films and blockbusters alike continue to reflect the diverse interests of their creators and subjects. Similarly, in the style of the Avengers, new cinematic forms do not arise *ex nihilo*, but are “assembled” from preexisting forms and patterns.

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