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Book Review

## Neoliberalism and Global Cinema. Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique

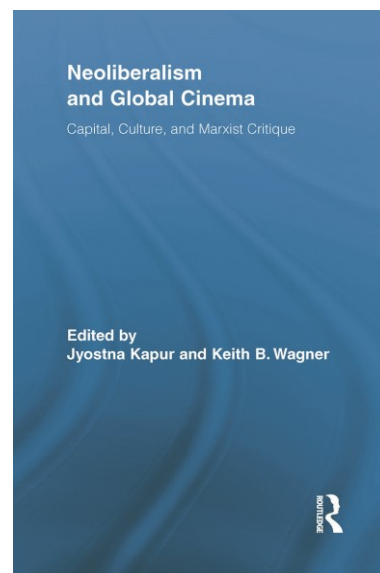
**Kapur, Jyostna & Wagner, Keith B. (eds.) (2011): Neoliberalism and Global Cinema. Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique. Routledge. 356 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-85414-6.**

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From the point of view of somebody who is working within the international film industry it is often surprising to read academic analysis of the own work. There is a huge gap between the realities we are working in and the external scholastic gaze. This might be due to the fact that the film industry sells illusions. No matter if a movie is called documentary or fiction and regardless of the amount of background information and making-of material published, cinema is, to speak with Jean-Luc Godard, not the reflection of reality but the reality of reflection. In many ways, I would say, it is the reflection of economic and political interests. Since its invention in 1896 film has been used as propaganda tool. The Paris Sound-Film Peace Treaty of 1930, an agreement between US-American Western Electric and German-Dutch *Tobis Klangfilm*, is maybe the widest known settlement of a clash of economic interests in the industry.

Communication among film professionals is rather informal and most of the published texts are advertisements in one way or another. In interviews directors, producers, actresses, actors, or other crew members promote their work and do



not critically question it. They speak about their achievements and only on very rare occasions, mainly when politically opportunist, of restrictions or the films they could not make. Public speeches are used to thank the financiers and prepare the funding of the next movie. Thus the majority of primary sources used by researchers support the manufacturing of cinematic illusions.

On this backdrop the title of the anthology *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema. Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*, edited by Jyostna Kapur and Keith B. Wagner, is promising. Cinema is a product of the industrialisation, it depends on apparatuses and its production is, till today, characterized by a heavy division of labour. From its outset cinema was expansionist and the access to the means of its production was limited, especially with regard to the colonies and the indigenous peoples in the Americas and Australia. An analysis of cinema that critically examines the multi-layered aspects of the industrial commodity film, caring for a historical perspective and being aware of questions of class would not restrict its sources to the various publicity materials produced for film releases.

The majority of the writings compiled in this book focus on film texts and not on film making though. Most of the authors rather look at how neoliberalism is represented or opposed to on screen than at how capitalism dictates, and enables, the productions. By doing so, they miss to uncover the usual discrepancy between the critical image and its neoliberal conditions of fabrication. They miss to ask why certain films are made and which scripts, more or less systematically, end up in the drawer. Why the mode of a film's production can be far more oppositional, radical or emancipatory than the narration it provides.

Xudong Zhang's article *Market Socialism and Its Discontent: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Narrative of China's Transition in the Age of Global Capital* for example is an interesting and informative text on this famous director's oppositional storytelling. Zhang mentions the importance of the introduction of digital cameras for the genesis of independent Chinese cinema without discussing any technical or economic questions. Nor does he relate Jia Zhangke's work, especially his internationally operating production company *Xstream Pictures* (the company is never mentioned), to the economic reforms in the country. Jia Zhangke, whom industry magazine *Variety* called "a darling of the international art-house set", had his works presented in the most prestigious international film festivals. He was invited to Berlinale, won a *Golden Lion* in Venice and is *Best Screenplay Winner* of Cannes International Film Festival. The digital cameras Zhangke uses are definitely of better quality than those the majority of independent filmmakers can afford. The same is true for his access to post-production means. Otherwise neither image nor sound would be good enough to present the movies to an international professional audience as part of the most honourable competitions in major festival palaces. Films' poor technical quality is a frequent reason to exclude them from competitions. In Europe and the United States Jia Zhangke is celebrated as the first independent director/producer in

China. He is a discovery. Of what or of whom is he independent? What does he turn away from and what is he opening up to? Which alliances does he need or does he compromise on? Which new dependencies do the oppositional stance and the huge international success create? Or isn't he maybe that exceptional within the Chinese context?

In "*Leitmotif: State, Market, and Postsocialist Film Industry under Neoliberal Globalization*" Ying Xiao writes about the "torturous divorce battle" (p. 162) that filmmakers underwent with the Chinese state in the mid-1990s and the new productions that "embrace self-enterprise and market-driven modes of governing" (p. 163). Unfortunately the text is rather descriptive and the author does not elaborate much, for example, on the conditions under which the new technology imports are made accessible or on the role international film festivals play in the emergence of the new independent cinematic movements in China or elsewhere in the post-Third World. Yet the contribution helps to get a sense of the environment in which Jia Zhangke and his *Xstream Pictures* operate.

Regrettably these two articles are the only ones in the anthology that complement each other and thus stimulate thought and understanding.

Because of being a product of the industrialisation and because of colonialism cinema has always been global and in large parts cultural imperialist. No matter in which costume capitalism appears, the film industry is part of it. Standardized technology and the according protection of patents have always been allowing the big studios to control huge markets and dominate exhibition space as much as they always have been allowing oppositional groups to make their work visible world wide.

The missing debate of the dilemmas inherent to the film industry might be one reason for the nationalistic tone of several contributions to this anthology. In their field research *Mainlandization and Neoliberalism with Post-colonial and Chinese Characteristics: Challenges for the Hong Kong Film Industry* Mirana M. Szeto and Yun-Chung Chen decided to foreground the perspectives of industry practitioners about their artistic expression and working conditions rather than relying on trade and profit figures (p. 249). For the research they spoke also to tycoons of the Hong Kong film industry and uncritically repeat their lamentations about the decline of the tycoons' business shares since the end of British rule over Hong Kong in 1997. Although the authors mention that the protection of Hong Kong films was eroded with the end of the Cold War, the end of Martial Law in Taiwan (1988) and the end of the British Rule they do not ask why it was the movies produced in the Crown Colony of all the non-European and non-US-American films that, for decades, gained international economic success. They favour protection of the Hong Kong film industry despite the new political status. The latter for sure led to redistribution, the territorial transfer of the industry, and the shrinking of the tycoons' market shares. In such cases employees always lose the jobs. Without

downplaying the social effects of the post-colonial Hong Kong situation, in the absent look at the situation of the film industry in general and the persistent emphasis on the downgraded situation of the own nation, swing patriot tones that surprise. Given the editors' claim that the theory and methodology applied for the book at hand is Marxism this lack of consideration for the larger political and socio-economic picture as well as ignoring the challenge to discuss insolvable contradictions is staggering.

In *French Cinema. Counter Model, Cultural Exception, Resistances* Martin O'Shaughnessy goes as far as to see French cinema as part of a wider anti-globalisation movement. By stating a dichotomy between open market USA and regulated France he largely connives at the economic and political interests the French state is protecting by the regulation of the film industry. Indeed, he briefly mentions the connection between the French funding of films from the Global South and the country's colonialist past, yet without looking at the structural continuities or mentioning the many ongoing debates around the subject. Also the listing of film titles that deal with questions of globalisation is not convincing as long as the films and their making are not analysed. Under the subheading "Cinema as Resistance" O'Shaughnessy writes, amongst others, about Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* as "one of French coproduced documentaries, that make commodity production and consumption their main target" (p. 342). Sauper's high budget, oscar-nominated documentary about the connection between the fish and the arms industries in Tanzania would have been a good example for critical investigation. That the Tanzanian president had set up a parliamentary committee to investigate the film's effect on the local fish industry, claiming that it had hurt the country's image and caused a slump in exports of Nile Perch might be seen as prove that films can have direct political effects. Yet the movie did not only upset the ruling class. Sauper's staged reality and beautified misery was criticised and disliked by many film professionals and audiences. With respect to resistance and Marxist critique *Darwin's Nightmare* calls to question the oppositional nature of the film and to explore the function of publicly sponsored critical artwork to the state's own political and economic system.

Jonathan Haynes article *Nollywood in Lagos, Lagos in Nollywood Films* was originally published in *Africa Today*. Hence it is not surprising that it does not relate much to the anthology's subject, yet it is an enriching reading. In *Cuban Cinema: A Case of Accelerated Underdevelopment* Michael Chanan takes a look at the interrelation between technology, politics and film aesthetics with an historical perspective. Irrespective of the Cuban example the contribution is absolutely worth reading for anybody interested in film politics.