

# The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema

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In 1989, I published an essay about national cinema in *Screen* (Higson 1989).<sup>1</sup> Ten years on, much of what I wrote still seems valid, but there are also some issues I would want to reconsider. One of the problems with that essay is that I was very much extrapolating from my knowledge of just one national cinema (British cinema). As Stephen Crofts has suggested, scholarly work on national cinema often operates from a very limited knowledge of the immense diversity of world cinemas (Crofts 1993: 60–1). In my case, there is undeniably a danger that my essay transformed a historically specific Eurocentric, even Anglocentric version of what a national cinema might be into an ideal category, a theory of national cinema in the abstract that is assumed to be applicable in all contexts.

'When is a cinema "national"?', asks Susan Hayward (1993: 1). As if in answer, Crofts delineates several different types of 'national' cinema that have emerged in different historical circumstances (1993, 1998). They have performed quite distinct functions in relation to the state. They have had very different relationships to Hollywood. Divergent claims have been made for them. They adopt a range of formal and generic characteristics. They are 'national' cinemas in a variety of ways. Faced with such variety, a single, all-encompassing grand theory may be less useful than more piecemeal historical investigations of specific cinematic formations. How have specific national cinemas been defined as such, for instance? How have they come to be understood as national cinemas, in what historical circumstances? How have politicians, trade organisations, distributors, critics, historians, journalists and audiences demarcated one national cinema from another? How has a particular body of films or a particular economic infrastructure come to be seen as embodying a distinct national cinema? Which strands or traditions of cinema circulating within a particular nation-state are recognised as legitimate aspects of the national cinema? How have particular policies and practices been mobilised in the name of particular national cinemas?

While these are undoubtedly important questions, and while I have attempted to explore some of them elsewhere, I do in fact want to deal with some of the more abstract and theoretical issues here.<sup>2</sup> First, I want to revisit the idea that the modern nation, in Benedict Anderson's terms, is an imagined community (Anderson 1983). Second, I want to reconsider the traditional idea of the 'national' as a self-contained and carefully demarcated experience. In particular, I want to suggest that the concept of the 'transnational' may be a subtler

means of describing cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained by national boundaries. Third, I want to examine John Hill's argument that the concept of national cinema is of vital importance at the level of state policy, particularly as a means of promoting cultural diversity and attending to national specificity (Hill 1992, 1996). For better or worse, I will again be drawing examples from the British context.

My intention overall is to question the usefulness of the concept of national cinema. It is clearly a helpful taxonomic labelling device, a conventional means of reference in the complex debates about cinema, but the process of labelling is always to some degree tautologous, fetishising the national rather than merely describing it. It thus erects boundaries between films produced in different nation-states although they may still have much in common. It may therefore obscure the degree of cultural diversity, exchange and interpenetration that marks so much cinematic activity.

## The nation as imagined community

Following Anderson (1983), it is now conventional to define the nation as the mapping of an imagined community with a secure and shared identity and sense of belonging, on to a carefully demarcated geo-political space. The nation, from this perspective, is first forged and then maintained as a bounded public sphere. That is to say, it is public debate that gives the nation meaning, and media systems with a particular geographical reach that give it shape. Those who inhabit nations with a strong sense of self-identity are encouraged to imagine themselves as members of a coherent, organic community, rooted in the geographical space, with well-established indigenous traditions. As David Morley and Kevin Robins put it, 'the idea of the "nation" . . . involve[s] people in a common sense of identity and . . . work[s] as an inclusive symbol which provides "integration" and "meaning"' (1990: 6).

National identity is, in this sense, about the experience of belonging to such a community, being steeped in its traditions, its rituals and its characteristic modes of discourse. This sense of national identity is not of course dependent on actually living within the geo-political space of the nation, as the *émigré* experience confirms. Thus some diasporic communities, uprooted from the specific geo-political space of the nation or the homeland, still share a common sense of belonging, despite – or even because of – their transnational dispersal. On the one hand community, on the other, diaspora. On the one hand, modern nations exist primarily as imagined communities. On the other, those communities actually consist of highly fragmented and widely dispersed groups of people with as many differences as similarities and with little in the sense of real physical contact with each other. If this is the case, it follows that all nations are in some sense diasporic. They are thus forged in the tension between unity and disunity, between home and homelessness. Nationhood thus answers to 'a felt need for a rooted, bounded, whole and authentic identity' (Morley and Robins 1990: 19).

The public sphere of the nation and the discourses of patriotism are thus bound up in a constant struggle to transform the facts of dispersal, variegation and homelessness into the experience of rooted community. At times, the experience of an organic, coherent national community, a meaningful national collectivity, will be overwhelming. At other times, the experience of diaspora, dislocation and de-centredness will prevail. It is in times such

as these that other allegiances, other senses of belonging besides the national will be more strongly felt.

It is widely assumed that the rituals of mass communication play a central role in re-imagining the dispersed and incoherent populace as a tight-knit, value-sharing collectivity, sustaining the experience of nationhood. But is that collectivity necessarily national? Consider three prominent media experiences that might be seen at one level as enabling the British to imagine themselves as a distinctive national community. First, consider the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, which of course became a major media event in which millions participated. Second, consider the consistent ratings success of long-running, home-grown, British-based soap operas depicting everyday inner-city life. Programmes such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* are of course routinely transmitted on a nationwide basis by British broadcasters with at least some sense of a public service remit. Third, consider the immense success at the box-office and subsequently on video and the small screen of a handful of 'typically British' films of the 1990s, among them *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *The Full Monty* (1997) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), all of them British-produced and British-set. Each of these media events has had repercussions far greater than mere viewing figures suggest, given their wide discussion in print, on television, on the Internet and through word-of-mouth.

But are these media events best understood as national phenomena? For a start, there are always dissenters. Some Britons did not mourn Diana's death or participate in the media event of her funeral. Some Britons don't watch soaps, go to the cinema, or take any interest in popular culture. Nor do they recognise themselves in films like *Four Weddings* or *The Full Monty*, or feel interpellated by the invitation through such texts or viewing experiences to share in a collective sense of national identity. Second, the audiences for all three cited events were by no means simply national. To talk about these events as global phenomena would surely be an overstatement, but they undoubtedly were, and in some cases continue to be, considerable transnational experiences. Third, there is of course no guarantee that all audiences will make sense of these experiences in the same way, since audiences will translate each experience into their own cultural frames of reference, using them in different contexts and for different ends.

Fourth, the 'national' audience for a film like *The Full Monty* also 'gathers' to watch non-indigenous films, especially Hollywood films. On the one hand, their coming together for a Hollywood film surely underlines the transnational experience of the 'imagined community', rather than a solely national experience. On the other hand, it is clear that American films play a strong role in the construction of cultural identity in the UK. Fifth, the community that we might imagine 'gathered' around, say, the exhibition and dissemination of *The Full Monty* is always a fortuitous, contingent, abstract amalgam of dispersed and specific audiences or cultural subjects that have come together for a very specific event. At the end of this particular experience or event, the imagined community disperses again, while other communities reassemble quite differently for other relatively fleeting experiences. Such communities are rarely self-sufficient, stable or unified. They are much more likely to be contingent, complex, in part fragmented, in part overlapping with other senses of identity and belonging that have more to do with generation, gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, politics or style than with nationality. The sense of community, of shared experiences and common identities that was mobilised around the death of Diana, for instance, was clearly mobilised beyond the boundaries of the nation. National identity did not always or necessarily come into it.



Thus in some quarters, the popular groundswell of empathy registered as feminism or sisterliness; in other quarters, or even at the same time, it took the shape of anti-authoritarian and especially republican principles.

The 'imagined community' argument, in my own work as much as anywhere else, is not always sympathetic to what we might call the contingency or instability of the national. This is precisely because the nationalist project, in Anderson's terms, imagines the nation as limited, with finite and meaningful boundaries. The problem is that, when describing a national cinema, there is a tendency to focus only on those films that narrate the nation as just this finite, limited space, inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off to other identities besides national identity. Or rather, the focus is on films that seem amenable to such an interpretation. The 'imagined community' argument thus sometimes seems unable to acknowledge the cultural difference and diversity that invariably marks both the inhabitants of a particular nation-state and the members of more geographically dispersed 'national' communities. In this sense, as with more conservative versions of the nationalist project, the experience and acceptance of diversity is closed off. This seems particularly unfortunate as modern communication networks operate on an increasingly transnational basis and cultural commodities are widely exchanged across national borders.

The media are vital to the argument that modern nations are imagined communities. But contemporary media activity is also clearly one of the main ways in which transnational cultural connections are established. Hollywood of course is one of the longest standing and best organised media institutions with a transnational reach capable of penetrating even the most heavily policed national spaces. Should this fact be celebrated or bemoaned? As Hollywood films travel effortlessly across national borders, they may displace the sort of 'indigenous' films that might promote and maintain specific national identities. On the other hand, the entry of 'foreign' films into a restricted national market may be a powerful means of celebrating cultural diversity, transnational experiences and multinational identities. Certain British films may have been identified as projecting a core sense of national identity – the consensus films made at Ealing Studios and elsewhere in the latter half of the Second World War, for instance – but it is equally possible to identify 'British' films that seem to embrace the transnational or even quite self-consciously to dissolve rather than to sustain the concept of the nation.<sup>3</sup>

## Nationalism and transnationalism

In 'The Concept of National Cinema' (Higson 1989), I suggested that national cinemas were the product of a tension between 'home' and 'away', between the identification of the homely and the assumption that it is quite distinct from what happens elsewhere. In this sense, there are two central conceptual means of identifying the imaginary coherence or specificity of a national cinema. On the one hand, a national cinema seems to look inward, reflecting on the nation itself, on its past, present and future, its cultural heritage, its indigenous traditions, its sense of common identity and continuity. On the other hand, a national cinema seems to look out across its borders, asserting its difference from other national cinemas, proclaiming its sense of otherness.

The problem with this formulation is that it tends to assume that national identity and tradition are already fully formed and fixed in place. It also tends to take borders for granted

and to assume that those borders are effective in containing political and economic developments, cultural practice and identity. In fact of course, borders are always leaky and there is a considerable degree of movement across them (even in the most authoritarian states). It is in this migration, this border crossing, that the transnational emerges. Seen in this light, it is difficult to see the indigenous as either pure or stable. On the contrary, the degree of cultural cross-breeding and interpenetration, not only across borders but also within them, suggests that modern cultural formations are invariably hybrid and impure. They constantly mix together different 'indigeneities' and are thus always re-fashioning themselves, as opposed to exhibiting an already fully formed identity.

The cinemas established in specific nation-states are rarely autonomous cultural industries and the film business has long operated on a regional, national and transnational basis. The experience of border crossing takes place at two broad levels. First there is the level of production and the activities of film-makers. Since at least the 1920s, films have been made as co-productions, bringing together resources and experience from different nation-states. For even longer, film-makers have been itinerant, moving from one production base to another, whether temporarily or on a more permanent basis. When a German director like E.A. Dupont is based in England, and makes an Anglo-German co-production simultaneously in English and German (*Atlantic*, 1929), can it usefully be called a British film?<sup>4</sup> When a British director like Alan Parker makes a Hollywood film about an Argentinean legend (*Evita*, 1996), to which nation should the film be attributed? When a British director teams up with an American producer, a multinational cast and crew, and American capital, to adapt a novel about the contingency of identity by a Sri Lankan-born Canadian resident (*The English Patient*, 1996), can its identity be called anything other than transnational?

The second way in which cinema operates on a transnational basis is in terms of the distribution and reception of films. On the one hand, many films are distributed far more widely than simply within their country of production. Occasionally, even the small, 'home-grown', indigenous film can become an international box-office phenomenon given the right backing and promotional push. On the other hand, when films do travel, there is no certainty that audiences will receive them in the same way in different cultural contexts. Some films of course are physically altered for different export markets, whether in terms of subtitling, dubbing, re-editing or censorship. But even where they are not altered, audiences can still take them up in novel ways.

The debates about national cinema need to take greater account of the diversity of reception, the recognition that the meanings an audience reads into a film are heavily dependent on the cultural context in which they watch it. The movement of films across borders may introduce exotic elements to the 'indigenous' culture. One response to this is an anxious concern about the effects of cultural imperialism, a concern that the local culture will be infected, even destroyed by the foreign invader. A contrary response is that the introduction of exotic elements may well have a liberating or democratising effect on the local culture, expanding the cultural repertoire. A third possibility is that the foreign commodity will not be treated as exotic by the local audience, but will be interpreted according to an 'indigenous' frame of reference; that is, it will be metaphorically translated into a local idiom.<sup>5</sup>

## Cultural diversity and national specificity: a matter of policy

One of the ways in which the nation talks to itself, and indeed seeks to differentiate itself from others, is in terms of state policy. The fear of cultural and economic imperialism has of course had a major impact on state policy in a great many different nations. Consequently, if the concept of national cinema is considered troublesome at the level of theoretical debate, it is still a considerable force at the level of state policy. One of the problems with legislating for a strong and healthy national cinema untroubled by foreign interlopers is that national legislation can rarely have more than a cosmetic effect on what is really a problem of the international capitalist economy. One of the solutions is that even governments occasionally operate on a transnational basis, notably in terms of the pan-European media funding infrastructure established under the auspices of the European Union and the Council of Europe.

Even so, there is no denying that at the level of policy, the concept of national cinema still has some meaning, as governments continue to develop defensive strategies designed to protect and promote both the local cultural formation and the local economy. Such developments have traditionally assumed that a strong national cinema can offer coherent images of the nation, sustaining the nation at an ideological level, exploring and celebrating what is understood to be the indigenous culture. Of equal importance today is the role that cinema is felt able to play in terms of promoting the nation as a tourist destination, to the benefit of the tourism and service industries. Also at the economic level, governments may legislate to protect and promote the development of the local media industries. They may encourage long-term investment (often from overseas). They may create the conditions that might generate significant export revenue. And they may seek to maintain an appropriately skilled domestic workforce in full employment.

To promote films in terms of their national identity is also to secure a prominent collective profile for them in both the domestic and the international marketplace, a means of selling those films by giving them a distinctive brand name. In this respect, it is worth noting how national labels become crucial at prestigious prize-giving ceremonies, such as the Oscars, for the kudos that can spill over from successful films on to their assumed national base. Note for instance the way in which the British press celebrated the success of films like *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *The English Patient* and *Shakespeare in Love* as British films, even though they all depended on significant amounts of foreign investment.

Given that the nation-state remains a vital and powerful legal mechanism, and given the ongoing development of national media policies, it remains important to conduct debate at that level and in those terms. It would be foolish in this context to attempt to do away altogether with the concept of national cinema. Yet it is important to ask to what precisely the concept refers, what sorts of cultural developments it can embrace and what it makes difficult. The implication of what I have argued so far is that the concept of national cinema is hardly able to do justice either to the internal diversity of contemporary cultural formations or to the overlaps and interpenetrations between different formations. This is surely true if we define a national cinema as one that imagines, or enables its audiences to imagine, a closed and coherent community with an already fully formed and fixed indigenous tradition. Ironically, it is very often the case that a government that legislates for a national cinema, or a pressure group that lobbies for such legislation, is in fact advancing an argument for cultural



diversity. Those western European nations, for instance, that have erected defensive mechanisms in their own marketplace and economy against an apparently imperialist Hollywood have almost invariably done so as a means of promoting a film culture and a body of representations other than those that Hollywood can offer.

Given the extent to which state media policy is still overwhelmingly defined in nationalist terms, it may then make sense to continue to argue for a national cinema precisely as a means of promoting cultural difference. A government-supported national cinema may be one of the few means by which a film culture not dominated entirely by Hollywood can still exist. This is an argument that John Hill has developed, with specific reference to British cinema. He suggests that the case for a national cinema is best made in terms of 'the value of home-grown cinema to the cultural life of a nation and, hence, the importance of supporting indigenous film-making in an international market dominated by Hollywood' (Hill 1992: 11). Such a statement of course begs the question of what exactly the value of that home-grown cinema is. This is particularly pressing in the light of the argument that the presence and popularity of Hollywood films in Britain is in itself a means of ensuring a populist diversity within British culture, a valuable means of broadening the British cultural repertoire.

Hill however is dismissive of the claim that the presence of Hollywood films within British culture should be seen as a potential democratisation of that culture. He argues that national cinemas have a much greater potential to act as forces for diversity and for the re-fashioning of the national cultural formation. 'It is quite possible to conceive of a national cinema', he writes, 'which is none the less critical of inherited notions of national identity, which does not assume the existence of a unique, unchanging "national culture", and which is capable of dealing with social divisions and differences' (Hill 1992: 16). In other words, to question tradition and to embrace cultural difference is not necessarily to reject altogether the idea of a national cinema that can speak eloquently to a multicultural audience. On the contrary, Hill argues, it is important that a national cinema is maintained in Britain, one that is 'capable of registering the lived complexities of British "national" life' (Hill 1996: 111). Hill suggests that this was precisely the national cinema that Britain enjoyed in the 1980s, when 'the "Britishness" of British cinema . . . was neither unitary nor agreed but depended upon a growing sense of the multiple national, regional and ethnic identifications which characterised life in Britain in this period' (Hill 1999: 244).

Is this a sufficient reason for persevering with the concept of national cinema? In fact, it seems to me that Hill is arguing less for a national cinema than for what might be called a critical (and implicitly left-wing) cinema, a radical cinema, or as he puts it, a cinema 'characterised by questioning and inquiry' (Hill 1992: 17). His concern is to ensure that the range of cultural representations available to audiences is not restricted by the operations of the marketplace. In this respect, as he puts it, 'The case for a national cinema . . . may be seen as part of a broader case for a more varied and representative range of film and media output than the current political economy of the communications industries allows' (Hill 1992: 18).

There are two problems with formulating a defence of national cinema in these terms. First, in order to promote a cinema characterised by questioning and inquiry is it necessary to do so on national grounds? A critical cinema surely need not be nationally based in its funding, its textual concerns or its reception. Likewise, cultural diversity within a national film-culture may just as easily be achieved through encouraging a range of imports as by ensuring that home-grown films are produced. Second, the British films of the 1980s that Hill favours

are by no means the full range of British-made films produced in that decade, but those whose radical subject-matter and critical approach appeal to his own ideological preferences. Most histories of national cinema have of course been written in this way. Canons of critically favoured home-grown films are created to the neglect of other films circulating within the film culture, whether home-grown or imported. The formation of such canons also tends to overlook the relative popularity of the canonical films with 'national' audiences. As far as Hill is concerned, 'the most interesting type of British cinema, and the one which is most worthy of support' does not 'exemplify . . . the virtues and values of Britain'. Instead, what he calls for is 'the provision of diverse and challenging representations adequate to the complexities of contemporary Britain' (Hill 1992: 18–19).

What sort of cinema does this imply? It seems to me that it is really a call for a very specific type of film: social dramas set in contemporary Britain, attending to the specificities of multiculturalism and employing a more or less realist mode of representation. It is thus hardly surprising that Hill's book on British cinema in the 1980s presents the British costume dramas and heritage films of the period as of less *relevance* than the films of Ken Loach, Stephen Frears and Isaac Julien. It is not necessarily the case, however, that audiences will find more relevance in contemporary dramas than in period films. Nor is it the case that only British-made or British-set films can address matters of importance or value to audiences in Britain. After all, questions of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, for instance, can be addressed in very poignant ways in displaced or exotic settings, whether the displacement is in terms of period or geography. In this sense, films by a Spike Lee, a Jane Campion or an Emir Kusturica can make what Hill describes as 'a valuable contribution to British cultural life' (Hill 1992: 17). The case for supporting a home-grown cinema, it seems to me, is thus weakened rather than strengthened by Hill's call for a critical cinema that promotes cultural diversity.

Given his emphasis on national specificity, there is even a sense in which Hill's argument depends on a rather enclosed sense of the national, in which borders between nations are fully capable of restricting transnational flow. He does of course argue that films made in a particular nation-state need not necessarily invoke homogenising national myths and may precisely be sensitive to social and cultural differences and to the plurality of identities *within* that state. He seems less sensitive to the hybrid or the transnational, however. Central to his argument is the distinction between a cinema that indulges in homogenising national myths and one that 'works with or addresses nationally specific materials' (Hill 1992: 16). It is a distinction he draws from the work of Paul Willemen, who argues that a nationally specific cultural formation need not necessarily be characterised by a preoccupation with national identity (Willemen 1994). As Willemen points out, the discourses of nationalism will always try to repress the complexities of and internal differences within a nationally specific cultural formation. But he also argues that a cinema that attempts to engage with the nationally specific need not be a nationalist cinema.

The terms in which Hill and Willemen make this distinction seem to me confusing and therefore problematic because they persist in using the concept of the national. Willemen is of course right to insist that 'national boundaries have a significant structuring impact on . . . socio-cultural formations' (Willemen 1994: 210). We cannot therefore simply dismiss the category of the nation altogether, but nor should we assume that cultural specificity is best understood and addressed in national terms. To persist, as Hill does, in referring to a 'nationally specific' cinema that deals with 'national preoccupations' (Hill 1992: 11) within



'an identifiably and specifically British context' (Hill 1992: 16) seems once more to take national identity, and specifically Britishness, for granted. It seems to gloss over too many other questions of community, culture, belonging and identity that are often either defiantly local or loosely transnational. Concepts like 'national life' and 'national culture' thus seem destined to imply a homogenising and enclosing tendency.

## Conclusion

I stated at the outset of this chapter that I wanted to question the usefulness of the concept of national cinema. It would be impossible – and certainly unwise – to ignore the concept altogether: it is far too deeply ingrained in critical and historical debate about the cinema, for a start. Even so, as Crofts has argued, it is important to question 'the ongoing critical tendency to hypostatize the "national" of national cinema' (1993: 61). The questions I have posed above suggest that it is inappropriate to assume that cinema and film culture are bound by the limits of the nation-state. The complexities of the international film industry and the transnational movements of finance capital, film-makers and films should put paid to that assumption. Should policy then be developed to ensure that cinema can operate at a national level? On the basis of the British experience, I have suggested that to make assumptions about national specificity is to beg too many questions. In other political circumstances, however, it may be that lobbying or legislating for a national cinema will usefully advance the struggle of a community for cultural, political and economic self-definition. As Crofts points out, in some contexts it may be necessary to challenge the homogenising myths of national cinema discourse; in others, it may be necessary to support them (1993: 62).

Are the limits of the national the most productive way of framing arguments about cultural diversity and cultural specificity? It is certainly valid to argue for a film culture that accommodates diverse identities, images and traditions, and it is undoubtedly important to promote films that deal with the culturally specific. But it doesn't seem useful to me to think through cultural diversity and cultural specificity in solely national terms: to argue for a national cinema is not necessarily the best way to achieve either cultural diversity or cultural specificity. In any case, the contingent communities that cinema imagines are much more likely to be either local or transnational than national.

## Notes

- 1 This was an early version of material subsequently revised in Higson 1995, in which I explore some of the ways in which British cinema has been constructed as a specifically national cinema. See also three other papers in which I discuss the concept of national cinema: Higson 1997, 2000a and 2000b.
- 2 I look at some of the ways in which British cinema has been constructed as a national cinema in Higson 1995 and 2001; Higson and Maltby 1999 look at the development of a pan-European, transnational cinema in the 1920s and 1930s.
- 3 For a more detailed version of this argument, see Higson 2000b.
- 4 For a discussion of Dupont's career in Britain in the late 1920s, see Higson 1999.

- 5 For enlightening discussions of this process of cultural translation, see Bergfelder 1999a and 1999b.

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