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"Reel Evil: Film Festivals, Dictatorship and the Passion for cinema" Darwin, Australia, June 2004

Prof. Ian Buchanan asked me to speak today about a film series I organized in the small tobacco town of Durham, North Carolina in the Spring of 2003. The film series was entitled *Reel Evil: Films from the Axis of Evil*. It ran from February through April of 2003 as the US and the coalition forces were churning the wheels of war and occupation in Iraq.

The series consisted of films from six rouge states namely Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Syria, Libya, and Cuba. More countries have been added to the U.S. government's definition of the "Axis of Evil" after the designation of the first six in May 2002 and some have been removed, but the countries in our series were at least representative of... of the sentiment. All six countries have and have had thriving film industries, with Iran at the helm, in international film festivals, competing with seventy feature films each year. You may know some of the films we screened by name and may also have seen some of them. The films that were screened were: *A Time for Drunken Horses*; *The Lion of the Desert*; *Plaff!*; *The Extras*; *Ten*; and *Pulgasari*. About

midway through my presentation I will stop and show you some brief segments of the films we screened.

My presentation today will first describe the background to the series and its global impact. And then consider some of the questions that the series generated.

The products of the film industries we were highlighting range from classical Hollywood style melodramas to low budget anti-colonial films. Hollywood does not have the corner on variety. The variety of genres produced by film industries around the world is actually very striking. And as a scholar of cinemas, highlighting this kind variety seemed consequential. In our planning we decided not to screen documentaries, but instead to go with fiction films. Part of the reason for this was our desire to emphasize that cinematic images, documentary or not, news stories or not, are always mediated. We did not want there to be any ambiguity about that particular fact.

Our desire was also to show that all narratives, like the narrative of "evil" which has unified a diversity of countries and cultures under a pernicious and violent label, have histories, and part of our effort was to show the variety of narratives that film cultures outside the U.S. produce. In a way, one could say that we wanted to measure the narrative of "evil" against other fictitious narratives.

In my thinking, narrative fictions that create dualities of good and evil must be put in conversation with other fictive narrative forms not only to weigh their applicability, but also to diffuse the purchase of such black and white binary constructions in our language and cultural thought.

I want to emphasize from the outset that the dominance of conventionalized modes of representation in film, combined with the transnational history of its media make it impossible for anyone to say that representation in film, in any film, is an authentic representation of that culture, even when the filmmaker is considered a national film *auteur*. While a simplistic articulation of the idea would have it that if there is a camera there, what you see on screen is not real, its corollary is the recognition that "realism," especially in relation to so-called Third world representations, stands as a alibi for "an authentic encounter with difference". If we come understand the conventions of realism as a historical imprint of an imperial logic applied to non-dominant cinemas, "realism" must be undone as the measure of foreign film reception and analysis. The global nature of film and media means that everyone's perception is influenced to some extent by what the dominant media portray. Thus Orientalist stereotypes have been internalized, not only by Western audiences, but by residents in the Middle East as well. But in this series, in the least, we thought our viewers could locate an

intervention in the public sphere by directors within film industries that rarely get screen-time in commercial cineplexes.

In "*Plaff!*" Or "*Splatt! Too afraid to Live*" we found a hilarious comedy about a middle-aged Cuban woman and her troubles with her new daughter-in-law. She suspects the daughter-in-law for throwing eggs at her when she least suspects it. She thinks of this as the daughter-in-law's plot to drive her out of house and home. When she finally dies of frustration and loneliness, the entire neighborhood admits to throwing eggs. *Plaff!* was a timely film as the U.S. and the coalition forces went to war. Two days after the war in Iraq began, it offered the community, some comic relief and an opportunity to reflect on the U. S. government's anxieties in relation to the threatening "other". But as comedy it also spoofed the conditions of filmmaking in the Third World context and as such it offered not only the spirit of Cuban humor but also an interesting consideration of the Cuban film industry. At the beginning of the film the projectionist within the film announces that the first reel has been delayed in transit and he'll just have to begin the screening with the second reel. The first reel arrives at the end of the film, making the whole thing rather lopsided.

*A Time for Drunken Horses* opened the film series in February. It is a Kurdish Iranian drama about the real-life struggles of an orphaned family of Kurdish children who make a living by smuggling tractor tires on the backs of horses across the border of Iran and Iraq. To cross the icy mountain range, the smugglers need to get the horses inebriated. (Hence the title.) The dramatic differences in landscape challenged the contrived images of the Middle East brought to us by the corporate media. The film offered a numbing representation of the everyday struggles of a people living under global economic sanctions.

In Nabil al-Maleh's Syrian love story, *The Extras*, we become witnesses the awkwardness of love relations in a culture context that frowns on the intimacy of lovers when lives are lived communally rather than for the individual. As the media kept insisting that we were screening propaganda in the midst of the war, the film represented how a government-sponsored film can effectively and overtly criticize the ways in which the Syrian government intervenes and limits individual freedoms.

The film series became possibly the most publicly recognized screening of foreign films at a university in the United States. The story was picked up by Reuters and was written up and broadcast all over the world within a week. Opinion columns locally and around the world debated the

series as a misconstrued response to U.S. foreign policy, while others suggested publicly that it was a quiet, pacifistic gesture of protest against the war, which everyone could emulate and participate in.

As the media interest in the project persisted over the course of the series a number of questions arose for me and I want to spend the remainder of the time with you discussing some of these. It seemed to me that on the one hand, the film series, became less about the political gesture of showing the human face of the so-called enemy on screen, and more about the functions of the cinema as such. To me, the lessons learned from the series as a commodity form, were fundamental.

Each news story contributed to a debate around visual representation and cinema's cultural and political impacts on the war on terror. What both surprised and delighted me, was that the debates around the series ranged beyond the conventional Hollywood inspired discussion of movies, film plots, and their special effects. While I was asked questions about plot lines and genres *on occasion*, the news stories and debates around the film series focused on questions of industry, mode of production, cinema's political impact and the intentional inscription of propagandistic ideology in the images that were screened.

Is it or is it not important to know that anti-colonial epic, The Lion of the Desert, very popular in Libya, and a co-production by the Italian and the Libyan film industry was bank rolled in part by Kaddafi? Is it or is it not important that the filmmaker who made this film was a Syrian who employed well known British actors to play some of the most important roles in the film? Is it or is it not important that the filmmakers were so obsessed with accuracy and detail that they employed Mussolini's own barber to give the actor playing him in the film a clean, bald shave?

Or take the example of the N. Korean film we screened, Pulgasari. Is it important to know that this Godzilla film was commissioned by Kim Jong Il himself— a man who is a huge film buff and in love with Liz Taylor and Sean Connery? Isn't important to know the effect of the Soviet and the Japanese film industry on N. Korean cinema and the ways in which this and the investment of the North Korean State in the arts differentiates its film industry products from the better known South Korean ones. Is it or is it not important to emphasize that the film could only be produced once Kim Jong Il had kidnapped a South Korean director and a South Korean actress to secure the making of the film, only to subsequently ban the film for well over ten years?

The debates in the global media around the screening of films produced in "rogue" states, emphasized not only the

power of cultural productions generally and film narratives specifically, they also focused attention on how film functions as a vehicle of politics, propaganda, imperial expansion and social change. As the French media theorist, Armand Mattelart, once remarked, the networks, as well as the media of communication, are the first materialization of notions of "progress, civilization, the universal and universalism". This history implicates the invention of cinema in the power-dynamics that have sustained wars, the colonial enterprise and imperialism itself (Mattelart 1994, 27). This fundamental function of the medium as part of the historical battle for natural resources, territory, and citizenry became immediately clear in the March of 2003 as the coalition forces bombed Baghdad's broadcasting facilities a week into the second war in Iraq. US war machines were fighting the Iraqi war machines, just as the US government's mediated representations of the war were being challenged by its enemy's counter-images.

Being conscious of the imbrications of the medium in the struggles for resources and citizenry and alert to the power differentials informed by the intervention of colonialism, imperialism, and global capitalism in national cultures how can audiences reckon with the representations of other cultures on screen? How does one move beyond the visual impulse to read representations as signs of realism or authenticity, and to instead, recognize practices of

mimicry, contestation and struggle with and against dominant representational practices and reception?

Clearly, I am convinced that film and, indeed media, cannot be studied independent of its socio-historical, cultural and economic contexts and effects. Limiting our relation to film to aesthetic and narrative interpretations, promotes and fixes a very dangerous stance that supports the dominating logic of the Hollywood film industry: namely the idea that film should be appreciated for the minor differences in narrative (which is what Hollywood, more than any other cinema culture, is good at). In Hollywood, it is these minor differences that cover over the standardization of the medium for greater and quicker profits, while masking a mode of production and industry that indulges in the most nefarious practices of imperialism and globalization utterly disinterested in craftsmanship except in the interest of commodification for profit. A study of film that does not attend to mode of production, industry, ideology, distribution and reception in relation to all films, cannot *but fall* into the logic of a dominant cinema that is complicit with imperialism and late capitalism. Narrative hides mode production by appearing seamless. And reading narrative alone, even for metaphor or national allegory, blocks access to cinema's political, historical, cultural and economic complicities.

Cinema can be far richer as educational tools when set within a more determining context, a context that considers films in terms of their modes of production and reception. This approach situates the effects of cinema on the public sphere, on subject formation and memory, on the constitution of national identities and on processes of globalization. If we move away from the naturalized Hollywood valuation of films as determined by narrational, representational and aesthetic worth, we can think of more creative ways to participate in the public sphere with and through a medium that our governments have historically found to be incredibly effective.

Contextualizing films by emphasizing processes of production, distribution, exhibition and reception, rather than naturalizing evaluations of cinema that tend regurgitate stories and weigh films in relation to realistic representation of cultures and events, will help us think of creative ways of using the medium of film and of organizing events that can change peoples minds about ourselves, about the world and create much needed sites for cross cultural understanding and public debate.

Mattelart, Armand Mapping World Communication: War, Progress, Culture trans. Susan Emanuel and James Cohen Minneapolis, UMN Press (1994)