

Title	Reframing diaspora cinema: Towards a theoretical framework
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Publication date	2023
Original Citation	De Man, A. (2023) 'Reframing diaspora cinema: Towards a theoretical framework', <i>Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media</i> , 25, pp. 24-39. <a href="https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.25.02">https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.25.02</a>
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	<a href="https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue25/HTML/ArticleDeMan.html">https://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue25/HTML/ArticleDeMan.html</a> - <a href="https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.25.02">https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.25.02</a>
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Download date	2025-01-26 04:38:22
Item downloaded from	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14922">https://hdl.handle.net/10468/14922</a>



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# Reframing Diaspora Cinema: Towards a Theoretical Framework

Alexander De Man

**Abstract:** *This article reviews how the concept of “diaspora cinema” has featured in academic discourses over the past thirty years, examining its underpinning paradigms. In the wake of a transnational and postcolonial shift within film studies, “diaspora cinema” has been increasingly understood in its imbrication with Third Cinema, postcolonial cinema, transnational cinema, accented cinema, intercultural cinema, cinema of transvergence, etc. While critically mapping out these descriptive conceptualisations and models, this article advances an understanding of “diaspora cinema” as an instrumental framework to grasp how diaspora identities, cultures, and spaces are discursively co-constructed through cinematic practices, rather than as a cinematic category per se.*

In its postwar period, Europe witnessed various migration flows as a result of its “long legacy of colonialism, the process of European integration, the geopolitical repercussions of the collapse of communism, continuing intra-European mobility and the influx of migrants and refugees from across the world” (Berghahn and Sternberg 2). As such, postcolonial and other migrants, holding unstable ties with a homeland in different ways and to different degrees (Georgiou 20), arrived and settled in European metropolises, forming what we have come to understand as “diasporas” (Tölölyan, “Rethinking” 3–7). This diversification and/or hybridisation of the European population was cinematically reflected in the proliferation of diasporic film practices. Ever since the mid-1980s, migrant and diasporic filmmakers gained more access to mainstream film production in the Western hemisphere, which resulted in an increased visibility of cross-cultural encounters in European cinema. “Hyphenated” creatives (Naficy, *Accented Cinema* 15–16) emerged, such as Turkish-German filmmakers (e.g., Thomas Arslan, Fatih Akin, Ayşe Polat, Tevfik Başer), Maghrebi-French or (post)beur filmmakers (e.g., Mehdi Charef, Abdelkrim Bahloul, Abdellatif Kechiche), Black British or Asian-British filmmakers (e.g., John Akomfrah, Isaac Julien, Martina Atille, Gurinder Chadha), and Iranian, Palestinian and Kurdish filmmakers in exile across Europe (e.g., Sohrab Shahid-Salles, Michel Khleifi, Yilmaz Güney) (Smets, “Exile” 3–5). They were often celebrated as “agents of hybridity” who occupied strategic and unique vantage points from which fixed, (neo)colonial, ethnocentric, and Eurocentric notions of the nation state, borders, cultural belonging, and national identities could potentially be called into question. At the same time, other (nonmigrant) filmmakers also made films that dealt with migration and diaspora in a way that may or may not subvert hegemonic discourses on these themes.

As scholars stemming from various paradigmatic backgrounds attempted to grasp and conceptualise these intercultural developments in European cinema, two distinguishable yet inextricably intertwined shifts of thinking within the academic field of film studies took place: a shift towards a transnational and towards a postcolonial understanding of cinema. Both shifts

draw upon the work of Arjun Appadurai who proposes a postnational rendition of Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities” by arguing that the national framework no longer adequately accounts for the globalised and diasporic intricacies of the modern world (164–68, 172–73). Applying this logic to film studies, Andrew Higson suggests in “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema” that the concept of the “transnational” may be “a subtler means of describing cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained by national boundaries” (57). In a similar vein, postcolonial interventions in film studies offered new and alternative ways of unpacking and critiquing European cinema in relation to dynamics of globalisation and colonial history (Ponzanesi and Berger 112).



**Figure 1: Winford Fagan as a young boy holding the British Flag in Handsworth Park, Birmingham (Vanley Burke, 1970 [cropped]). Birmingham Central Library. This photo was used by both John Akomfrah in *Handsworth Songs* (1986), produced by Lina Gopaul, and by Steve McQueen in *Red, White and Blue (Small Axe, 2020)*, produced by BBC One and Amazon Studios (Austin).**

In the wake of these new sensibilities, and as a result of the growing concern with diasporic film practices, the concept of “diaspora cinema” has been increasingly understood in its imbrication with concepts such as Third (World) cinema, postcolonial cinema, exilic cinema, transnational cinema, accented cinema, intercultural cinema, cinema of displacement, cinema of going West, cinema of transvergence, etc. The result is a theoretical labyrinth of definitive and descriptive models of “diaspora cinema” that aim to conceptualise and categorise a heterogeneous and perhaps even unidentifiable body of films, based on issues of authorship, interstitial modes of production, representational strategies, and/or aesthetic choices (Marks; Naficy, *Accented Cinema*; Petty; Berghahn and Sternberg; Mercer). In this article, I distinguish two types of models: “identity models” that base themselves on the identity of the filmmaker and “textual models” that categorise films as “diaspora cinema” drawing on the films’ subject matter. After critically mapping out these conceptualisations and their underpinning paradigms, I advance an understanding of “diaspora cinema” as an instrumental framework to grasp how diaspora identities, cultures, and spaces are discursively co-constructed through cinematic practices rather than as a cinematic category per se. By applying “diaspora cinema” as a heuristic term “*bon pour penser avec*” (a paraphrase of Claude Lévi-Strauss qtd. in Tölölyan,

“Diaspora” 5), we can avoid the pitfall of problematically essentialising “diaspora cinema” as an object of study based on an arbitrarily selected set of criteria upon which it ought to (or ought not to) be operationalised (e.g. the ethnicity of the filmmakers). For the sake of conceptual clarity, I will first explain how the respective turns towards a transnational and postcolonial understanding of cinema both are—be it from different angles—concerned with diasporic film practices, whereas neither is able to fully grasp its specificities.

### **Towards a Transnational Understanding of Cinema**

In 2000, Andrew Higson emphasised the limitations of the imagination of national cinemas, problematising the notion of the nation as a fixed, monolithic, and culturally coherent entity (“Limiting Imagination”). Instead, he proposed a transnational understanding of cinema as a more effective model upon which to identify the cross-border dynamics at the level of production, distribution, and reception that have characterised cinema from its inception. Higson does not necessarily oppose the national versus the transnational in a binary manner—where the first ceases to exist when the latter takes over—nor does he dismiss the notion of the national as irrelevant. What he merely points out is that the nation is always produced in a tension between “us” and “them”, or between “home” and “away” (60–1). While Higson is mostly preoccupied with the transnational dimensions of film in terms of its political and industrial context, he tends to omit films that epitomise transnationalism, diasporism, and postcolonialism textually. As such, the question of whether or not the more critical categories of the “diasporic” and the “postcolonial” are by definition included in any discussion of transnational cinemas has become subject to much debate (Higbee and Lim 9). The most prominent theorists that clearly try to open up or explore such a critical and diasporic perspective within the concept of “transnational cinema” are Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden and Will Higbee.

First of all, Ezra and Rowden refuse to sketch the space of the transnational as “an anarchic free-for-all in which blissfully deracinated postnational subjects revel in ludically mystified states of ahistoricity” (4). On the contrary, they consciously choose to incorporate questions of (voluntary or forced) migration and diaspora within their analysis of transnational cinemas. Over the course of their edited volume *Transnational Cinema*, diasporic identifications with loss or displacement, the sense of longing towards an idealized homeland, the interstitial positioning in non-places, cultural difference, and power (7–11) are all regarded as key tropes of transnational cinema as they understand it.<sup>1</sup> However, with regard to postcolonialism, they take up a different stance. In weighing postcolonialism and transnationalism up against each other, they suggest that the latter offers a more multivalent approach to consider the confluence of historical and contemporary as well as global and local experiences, without necessarily privileging one (i.e., the postcolonial experience) over another (5). Here, Higbee interferes by aiming to locate the postcolonial within the broader framework of transnationalism as it is useful in some cases (e.g., Algerian émigré directors in France) (“Locating” 52).

Despite these myriad efforts to refocus its descriptive range, it is clear that the theoretical concept of transnational cinema does not necessarily imply the study of the economic, socio-cultural, and ideological place of diasporic and postcolonial film practices as a symbolic site of struggle in the global industry. It specifically fails to do so, in as much that it risks being too generic (Berghahn and Sternberg 22) and not sufficiently politically engaged in order to fully grasp either the imbalances at play when these cross-cultural exchanges take

place or the politics of difference and recognition that so often characterise these diasporic film practices. Hence, the concept of “transnational cinema” may ambiguously include both Palestinian directors in exile across Europe as well as successful European filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock or Ridley Scott who were employed in Hollywood where they enjoyed access to higher budgets and extra logistical support.

A second issue that comes across when trying to locate “the diasporic” as a subcategory of “transnational cinema” originates from the notion of a “homeland”. Since Ezra and Rowden postulate that “the transnational at once transcends the national and presupposes it”, we can conclude that, in order for a transnational dimension to exist, a national one must prevail (4). However, as we learn from social constructionist theorists such as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Paul Gilroy, for some diasporas this is simply not always the case. Referring to the Caribbean matter, Stuart Hall claims that

to have a cultural identity in this sense [having an orientation towards a homeland or a nation state] is to be primordially in touch with an unchanging essential core, which is timeless, binding future and present to past in an unbroken line. [...] Questions of cultural identity in diasporas cannot be “thought” in this way. They have proved so troubling and perplexing for Caribbean people precisely because, with us, identity is irredeemably a historical question. Our societies are composed, not of one, but of many peoples. Their origins are not singular but diverse. (“Thinking” 4–5)

In this cultural studies approach, a diaspora must be defined not by its alleged essence or purity, nor by the presence of a so-called umbilical cord towards a sacred homeland—let alone a juridic-political nation state—but as a heterogeneous, syncretised configuration of difference and hybridity that lives in and through the slippage of meaning in the dialogical semiosis of a culture (Hall, “Thinking” 4; “Cultural” 225–26). While this understanding of “diaspora” offers a deterritorialising shift away from the rigid structures of nation states and fixed conceptions of difference, the taxonomy of transnationalism risks being an atavistic return of the modernist episteme in which nation states—be it a combination of two or more—are privileged as the central and perhaps only imaginary upon which people build their cultural identities. One could even go so far as to argue that transnationalism jeopardises its own project by terminologically (re)confirming that which it seeks to decompose, namely a nation-centred discourse.

By no means I intend to obfuscate the entire framework of transnationalism, since this shift paved the way for what I will propose as an understanding of “diaspora cinema” as a critical stance. What I merely wish to point out is that the conceptual term of transnational cinema, firstly, remains too generic to grasp certain diasporic specificities (e.g., Algerian émigré directors in France), and, secondly, by its very nomenclature is too concentrated on the notion of a national homeland to encapsulate all diasporic film practices (e.g., Black British filmmaking). The first issue problematises the usage of the concepts of “the diasporic” and “the transnational” as synonyms, whereas the second issue negates the notion of “the diasporic” as a subcategory of the broader framework of “transnationalism”. Instead, the transnational and the diasporic are two separate affairs that actively overlap and interact with one another. A third concept that comes into play is “the postcolonial”.

## Towards a Postcolonial Understanding of Cinema

If the concept of “transnational cinema” is not sufficiently preoccupied with the historical and cultural specificities of diasporic, political, religious, and ethnic minorities, this is where the concept of postcolonial cinema enters the battlefield. This postcolonial shift is more clearly inclined toward the project of de-Westernising film studies and deconstructing Eurocentric universalism. By turning the gaze back upon the modernist and colonial epistemology of European imperialism, postcolonial theory aims to make the invisible –what Ponzanesi and Waller describe as the persisting “colonization of the imagination” (2)– visible (Young qtd in Ponzanesi, “Postcolonial theory” 19) . Relying on poststructuralist thought, influential scholars such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and many others asked questions about the modes of representing the Other.<sup>2</sup> According to Saer Maty Bâ and Will Higbee a de-Westernised and postcolonial understanding of cinema further complicates and/or rethinks “how local, national, and regional film cultures ‘connect’ globally, seeking polycentric, multi-directional, non-essentialized alternatives to Eurocentric theoretical and historical perspectives” (1). It does so by addressing both the long-standing hegemonic, racist, or orientalist stereotypes present in dominant media discourses as well as the counterhegemonic anti- or de-colonial aesthetics and narratives introduced by activist filmmakers (e.g., Haile Gerima, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Julie Dash, etc.).

These activist filmmakers do not necessarily fall under the historical category of Third Cinema, which, as Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller explain, we should appreciate as a politically contentious project of the 1960s, incited by the Latin American filmmakers Ottavio Getino and Fernando Solanas (5–6). In their manifesto “Towards a Third Cinema”, they called for a “guerrilla cinema” that ought to function as a militant weapon against the authoritarian oppression of the Euro-American imperial gaze (Ponzanesi and Waller 5). Inspired by Frantz Fanon’s writings, they suggested that this was the only way to liberate themselves and to overcome “the colonial neurosis” that was previously imposed upon them (Fanon qtd. in Ponzanesi and Waller 5–6). Ponzanesi and Waller go on to argue that, notwithstanding their shared interest in depicting occluded histories from the perspective of the “subaltern”, the concept of postcolonial cinema differs from the Third Cinema project in that it must be understood “not as a new genre, or a new rubric, but as an optic through which questions of postcolonial historiography, epistemology, subjectivity, and geography can be addressed” (3). As such, postcolonial cinema is more interested in obliquely scrutinising how geo-political forces and imbalances affect the lives of individual subjects, as opposed to demonstrating “iconic figures of freedom fighters” (7).

Nonetheless, a similar question as with the transnational shift must be posed here: where can we position the conceptual term of “diaspora cinema” in relation to the concept of postcolonial cinema? The best way to delve into this is by examining how the concept of “diaspora” may or may not account for some of the shortcomings of “postcolonialism” and “postcolonial displacement”. As Shohat and Stam clarified in their preeminent work *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, the prefix “post” in “postcolonialism” brings about some ambiguities. It either refers to “the disciplinary ‘advances’ of intellectual history”, thus aligning itself with postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, or it indicates a temporal and epochal transition announcing the end of European expansion (38). This temporal element contradicts the major emphasis that postcolonial critique usually places on the perpetual and ongoing legacies of colonialism. In his writings about flows of migration and globalisation, Hall claims that these processes are located in a much longer (colonial) history whose “postness” is highly questionable (“Local” 20). Higbee

even speaks of this as simply the most recent manifestation of the same process (i.e., imperialism) (“Locating” 52–3). While the concept of “diaspora” focuses on forced and/or voluntary migration, displacement, and human mobility in a historical context as well, it does not have the same ambiguous connotation of “postness” that postcolonialism has.

A second issue with postcolonialism that was raised by Shohat and Stam is the negligence of any other form of political or historical dispute than the colonial one. As such, the concept of postcolonialism remains fundamentally Eurocentric in at least three ways: it privileges the colonial era of European expansion, it maintains the binary relation between former coloniser and colonised, and it homogenises all colonial subjects into one singular category (Shohat and Stam 38–9). The concept of “diaspora” is guilty of none of these allegations as it simply points to cross-border social formations (or communities) with a shared awareness of multiple belonging and mobility that partly stem from an often-traumatic displacement or deterritorialisation and discursive processes surrounding it (Tölölyan, “Rethinking” 28–30). As such, the category “diaspora cinema” comprises films by filmmakers living outside of their ancestral “homeland” or films that thematically deal with this diasporic positionality. On the other hand, when “diaspora cinema” is used to speak of postcolonial filmmakers in the West such as Algerian émigré directors in France, the concept has the disadvantage that it does not necessarily evoke the coercive impact of colonialism on the work of these artists. As such, we need not do away with the concept of “postcolonial cinema”, yet I suggest that the concept of “diaspora cinema” offers a less ambiguous and less homogenising category to connect film cultures in a polycentric way, whilst still being committed to the political and historical disparities that have shaped the world as it is today.

### **Models of Diaspora Cinema**

Whereas the concept of transnational cinema is too generic and inadequate when it comes to studying sensibilities of migration, diaspora, and human mobility in film, the concept of postcolonial cinema remains ambiguous and too preoccupied with the history of European expansion to encapsulate other forms of deterritorialisation and displacement. It is my argument that, in bringing these two lines of thinking together, the concept of “diaspora cinema” takes up an ambivalent position in between these two categories from which these limitations can be tackled all at once. If anything, these two shifts in film studies simultaneously triggered scholars dealing with migration and film to attempt to conceptualise or categorise this heterogeneous and perhaps even unidentifiable body of films. The result is a theoretical labyrinth of definitive and descriptive models of diaspora cinema, each of which has its complications. Even though it is impossible to provide a complete and exhaustive overview of the literature here, I will aim to map these models by distinguishing two types of models that differ from each other in how they operationalise diaspora cinema. First, there are what I call “identity models” that focus on the biographical background of the filmmaker. Second, there are “textual models” in which films are categorised in reference to their subject matter.

In identity models of diaspora cinema, Hamid Naficy’s seminal concept of an “accented cinema” has proven to be the most theoretically useful. Naficy specifically focuses on filmmakers who, as subjects of (postcolonial) displacement, “exist in a state of tension and dissension with both their original and their current homes” (“Situating” 111). As filmmakers they are displaced but not without place, “situated yet universal” (111). They share a liminal subjectivity and are located at the interstices of society and the mainstream film industry from which they operate independently through collective and interstitial modes of production

(*Accented Cinema* 46–56).<sup>3</sup> Naficy uses the term “interstitial” instead of marginal or subaltern in order to reject the periphery–centre binary. Due to their particular, liminal subjectivity and the interstitial position in the industry, these accented filmmakers are more prone to the politics of difference or the struggles for recognition and have the potential to question notions of Europeanness, national identities, and territorial or symbolic borders. These “accented filmmakers”, however, do not form a homogeneous group. They are put together by that “difference” which is an important component of their identity, but it is also this very difference that separates them from each other. Their relocation to the interstices of the Western cosmopolitan centres—or the fact that they are born in them—can be the result of a multitude of historical and political circumstances. As such, Naficy differentiates three permeable subcategories under the rubric of accented filmmakers: exilic, diasporic and postcolonial, and ethnic and identity filmmakers (*Accented Cinema* 11–17).

He uses the term “exilic” to describe those filmmakers who are obligated to produce and distribute their work in the fissures of the Western market as they face censorship, interrogation, or imprisonment in their homeland. They are oppositional figures against a cultural or political regime but maintain a strong relationship with their homes. Their films are centred around the “there and then” and often express an intense desire to return “home” by fetishizing it as a sacred place through cathected sounds, images, and chronotopes (Naficy, *Accented Cinema* 11–13). “Diaspora filmmakers” are to be understood here as those who use cinema to nurture a long-term, distinct ethnic consciousness and a collective memory. Their homing desire, which is either state-based or stateless, is multi-sited and their diasporic stance is characterised by multiplicity, plurality, and hybridity. Their films are accented in that they focus on the performativity of their unfixed identities rather than on deracination, loss, and binary oppositions between cultures, as is often the case with exilic filmmakers (13–15). The last category of “postcolonial, ethnic, and identity filmmakers” differs from diasporic filmmakers in the emphasis on their racial or ethnic difference within the countries in which they reside and work. Their films focus on the “here and now” and on how their ethnic identity is a marker of difference, marginality, and historical violence that complicates the process of integration and/or assimilation (15–17). Naficy delineates how these subjectivities (whether exilic, diasporic, or postcolonial) result in what he calls an “accented structure of feeling” (26–28). Entrenched within their profound sense of loss and deterritorialisation, a “set of undeniable personal and social experiences” with internal relations and tensions that are always in process (26). This “structure of feeling” is translated into the themes, narratives, and aesthetics of their films in the form of an “accented style”. Multilinguality, asynchronicity of voice and speaker, potent return narratives to a romanticised homeland, epistolary, border consciousness, etc. are only few of the chronotopes that Naficy describes as typical of the mode of address in this “accented style” (22; “Situating” 118).

Another scholar who considers the diasporic experience of a filmmaker as a constitutive element of their work is Laura Marks. In her book *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, she discusses the “experimental styles” that are used in a niche body of films that ought to represent the phenomenological experience of “living in between two or more cultures” (10). Marks connects these experimental modes of address with the identity of the filmmakers in that the experience of migration or diaspora impacts their entire sensorial and, thus, cinematic apparatus. She outlines Naficy’s “accented structure of feeling” more in terms of a “cultural memory” (21). This cultural memory is “embedded in and embodied by the senses and therefore mediated by the very fabric and feel of film” (Ponzanesi, “Non-Places” 13). As such, Marks advocates for an understanding of film in terms of “haptic (or tactile) visuality” (162). It is through formal experimentation and by rejecting the



ideological presumption that cinema can represent reality, that these diasporic filmmakers create “haptic images” that evoke the senses of touch, smell, and taste. They do so in a way that synesthetically speaks to their cultural and collective memory (often a memory of the homeland). In and of itself, “intercultural cinema”, which ceases to become a genre or a movement, is less interested in restoring official and recognised histories through representative modes of representation than it aims to excavate personal, but most of all sensorial and bodily (haptic) counter-memories of those who reside in “the power-inflected spaces of diaspora” (1). Through these haptic and tactile expressions of private cultural memories, diasporic filmmakers uncover the constructed and fictionalised nature of history and as such “make history reveal what it has not been able to say” (Mercer 283).

With their conceptual terms of “accented cinema” and “intercultural cinema”, Naficy and Marks avoid the pitfall of reiterating a nation-centred taxonomy. However, they both connect aesthetic qualities and representational strategies on a textual level with the identity of who is behind the camera. In so doing, Naficy claims that “any discussion of authorship in exile needs to take into consideration not only the individuality, originality, and personality of unique individuals as expressive film authors but also, and more importantly, their (dis)location as interstitial subjects within social formations and cinematic practices” (*Accented Cinema* 34). This is contested to a degree by Arne Saeys, who claims that such a categorisation of accented filmmakers, based on a generalised past of displacement, is “reductive” and “reinforces the Othering of migrant filmmakers” (32). More recently, Kevin Smets described the strategy of “ethnic labeling” as one of the major theoretical and methodological challenges for media and migration scholars, as it inevitably prompts a certain degree of essentialism and “cultural reductionism” (“Doing” 100). Moreover, by self-consciously associating accented filmmakers with an interstitial mode of production, one that at once opposes and embeds criticism of the dominant or mainstream industry, Naficy ghettoises them into a subcultural cinema that has no potential whatsoever to reach larger audiences (Saeys 14–15). By the same token, Marks limits her category of “intercultural cinema” to experimental films. This no longer accurately describes the current position of migrant and diasporic filmmakers in the West, as many of them today have either “become mainstream” or are simply considered as conspicuous voices in contemporary popular cinema (e.g. Gurinder Chadha, Fatih Akin, Steve McQueen, Abdellatif Kechiche, Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah). This pertains to what Sarita Malik described as the shift from a “cinema of duty” to a celebratory cinema that delves into the “pleasures of hybridity” (211). The social impact that these filmmakers have had ever since the 1980s, as well as the commercial successes that came with it, are irreconcilable with Naficy’s category of interstitiality or Marks’ category of intercultural cinema.

This is, however, not to say that diasporic artists no longer cope with the predicaments of discrimination and exclusion, nor that their particular historicities and subjectivities vanish into thin air. However, a more subtle concept to discern how the “structure of feeling” or “cultural memory” of diasporic filmmakers is translated onto the silver screen was introduced by Sujata Moorti as “the diasporic optic”. This is described as “a sideways glance that looks constantly at two or more worlds and moves in different directions at once”, a “visual grammar that seeks to capture the dislocation, disruption and ambivalence that characterizes their [the diasporans’] lives” (259). It is from this “diasporic optic” that diasporic filmmakers capture a particular “way of seeing”. Moorti remains strategically ambiguous when describing this “particular way of seeing” as it is unstable, contingent, and does not fit onto any one nation state or culture. On the contrary, it exists in and through the amalgamation of cultural images of both Western and non-Western popular cultures. In the light of this concept, it would be absurd to state that the diasporic identity of filmmakers and their cultural background should

be ruled out in the analysis of diasporic film practices, yet it would be equally problematic to consider it as the only decisive variable.

In textual models of diaspora cinema, the relevant aspect is not the author of the film, but the way in which the film engages with migration and diaspora at a textual level. Even before Naficy and Marks, Bishnupriya Ghosh and Bhaskar Sarkar introduced the concept of “cinema of displacement” to review the “spatial features” of films representing displaced protagonists (102). Verena Berger and Miya Komori’s model of “polyglot cinema” is predicated on multilingualism on a textual level.<sup>4</sup> David Forgacs called upon film theory and cultural studies in his textual analysis of the film *Pummarò* (Michele Placido, 1990) to compare two conflicting camera gazes at the diasporic protagonist: a gaze of vicarious, cross-race identification, and a distancing or alienating gaze whereby the character becomes an object of contemplation for the viewer (86–89). Another method to discern how a film reflects the cultural Other was put into practice by Guido Rings by drawing upon the concepts of “mono-”, “inter-”, “multi-” and “transculturality” (10–12). Ultimately, what these scholars all have in common is that they are interested in the textual qualities (spatial features, multilingualism, camera perspective, and narration) of diaspora cinema and propose a more “open” definition of it, compared to the “identity models”. Similarly, Sheila Petty appropriates Paul Gilroy’s vital question “what is being resisted and by what means” as the central question that should be asked when looking at, in this case, Black diasporic cinema (6).

Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg too consider migrant and “diaspora cinema” “as being demarcated by subject matter in the broadest sense rather than by a combination of biographical and representational factors” (17). In their description of migrant and diaspora cinema, they suggest that it is a cinema that transcends national boundaries, while reflecting the double consciousness or diasporic optic of its creators through “an aesthetically hybrid approach which juxtaposes and fuses stylistic templates, generic conventions, narrative and musical traditions, languages and performance styles from more than one (film) culture” (41). Whereas in the “identity models” this “double consciousness” or “diasporic optic” is typically restricted to filmmakers who have migrant or diasporic backgrounds, Berghahn and Sternberg draw on Avtar Brah’s notion of the “diaspora space” to argue that in the same way that diasporic filmmakers are not necessarily preoccupied with themes of migration and diaspora in their work, filmmakers who are typically considered as representatives of the host society may produce films that revolve around cross-cultural and cross-border encounters (17).<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, in their project of circumventing the “biographical fallacy”, by no means they wish to underestimate the vital role of migrant and diasporic filmmakers in the process of coming into representation or in challenging stereotypes and racial tropes of dominant media discourses (17).

As such, authorship remains an important issue to be discussed. Therefore, Berghahn and Sternbergh distinguish three different types of filmmakers based on their divergent memorial sense of displacement and deterritorialization (16). The first category of “migrant filmmakers” comprises filmmakers who witnessed a voluntary or forced displacement from an original homeland and who consequently have a direct memory of it. The second category of “diasporic filmmakers” are migrants’ children of the second or third generation, who were born into the Euro-American metropolises. They did not experience migration themselves but are able to create a “postmemory”, to use Marianne Hirsch’s term, through the indirect knowledge transformation with their kinship between generations (qtd. in Berghahn and Sternbergh 16). As such, they appropriate the often-traumatic histories of their predecessors. The third and last category is “non-diasporic filmmakers” who draw on a “prosthetic memory”, the term proposed

by Alison Landsberg to conceptualise the process through which non-diasporans generate empathy and a sensuous engagement with a past distinct from their own, mediated through film and other forms of mass media (qtd. in Berghahn & Sternbergh 17–18). According to Berghahn and Sternbergh this prosthetic memory “allows non-diasporic filmmakers to see through the eyes of the Other and to identify with them” (17–18). Similarly, in her theorisation of a “cinema of going West”, Antonela Gyöngy elaborates on these notions of direct-, post-, and prosthetic memory, while emphasising their constitutive role in the construction of transnational, communicative spaces of remembrance (110).

While all three of these memorial connections to the conundrum of migration and diaspora can conceivably evoke counterhegemonic discourses that subvert fixed notions of cultural difference or racial Otherness, they may as well function as tokenistic commodities of sensationalism on a market that, since the 1980s onwards, has embraced “the pleasures of hybridity” as a popular trope of the mainstream industry (Malik 211). Yosefa Loshitzky (8) and Temenuga Trifonova (76) both draw attention to the transgressive power of migrant and diaspora cinema, claiming that “migrants” have become central and symbolic figures in contemporary European cinemas that challenge us to rethink dominant and elitist notions of Europeaness. Nonetheless, we should remain prudent when celebrating this coming to the foreground of the migrant in more dominant forms of mass media discourses. Ipek A. Celik, for instance, takes up a more pessimistic position in her book *In Permanent Crisis: Ethnicity in Contemporary European Media and Cinema*, in which she explores how and why crisis and catastrophe (often central to the diasporic space of remembrance) have become central to the articulation of ethnic and racial difference in European cinema. Through a detailed analysis of European film productions, Celik explains that migrants thereby only become visible in mainstream media discourses either as savage criminals or as pitiful victims.

### **Reframing “Diaspora Cinema”**

Will Higbee identified and surpassed many of the shortcomings and limitations of the identity and textual models when he advanced the concept of a “cinema of transvergence”. Drawing on Novak’s concept of “transvergence”<sup>6</sup> and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “the rhizome”<sup>7</sup>, he proposed an analysis of how postcolonial and diasporic cinemas function “not only across borders, nations and cultures but also within them” (“Beyond the (Trans)national” 80). The “cinema of transvergence” operates as a theoretical frame from which we must perceive diaspora cinema as “an engaged (politicized) site of resistance which foregrounds the experiences of the alienated, marginal other” (87). It negotiates a position “that is both centre and margin”, denies a binary, (neo)colonial epistemology and indicates the transcultural and transformative potential of diasporic film practices (86). Valuable as it may be in numerous cases, this concept, similarly to many of the concepts discussed above, does not account for all diasporic film productions as in some ways it excludes film productions that textually re-establish binary notions of difference. Indeed, defining “diaspora cinema” and labelling it with theoretical concepts also means to some extent homogenising it and drifting it into a discursive ghetto from which it is henceforth to be understood. That being the case, it is important to acknowledge that film theoretical discourse risks misconstruing the socio-political, cultural, historical, and industrial particularities at play for individual films and to be self-reflexive about the performativity of its established categories. As was the case of Third Cinema, these concepts are often appropriated by film critics and professionals who somewhat carelessly use them as catch-all phrases or taglines in marketing campaigns and newspaper reviews. As a

result, these categories are not neutral and structure the way in which films are bracketed on the market, advertised, criticised, and read by audiences.

Therefore, I suggest an understanding of diaspora cinema as an instrumental framework to grasp how diaspora identities, cultures, and spaces are discursively co-constructed through cinematic practices rather than as a cinematic category per se. Diaspora cinema, as I aim to understand it, is not and will never be a genre that can be described based on a set of coherent, productional, textual, and/or aesthetic qualities. This pernicious appreciation, where diaspora cinema becomes a referent to a homogeneous and identifiable body of films, has proven to be problematic in terms of essentialism and ethnic labelling. Consequently, the question of how we ought to (or ought not to) operationalise this supposed body of work—based on the ethnic identity of the filmmakers or based on the subject matter of the film—becomes irrelevant. One could, of course, argue that such labels or categories (*beur cinéma*, Third Cinema, etc.) can be empowering for those who are within them, as their interstitial position becomes an entitled one, and when considering the film history, this has most definitely been the case for many individual diasporic filmmakers. Yet these categories fail to interrogate and sometimes even reiterate the ideological and epistemological dispositions that lie at the core of the imbalances they face. As such, I regard these categories (or the strategy of categorising in itself) as utterly impotent to tackle the inert disparities that structure film industries and film cultures.

Instead, the concept of diaspora cinema should refer to a critical stance within the field of film studies, a kaleidoscopic optic or lens that opens up a conceptual space (with concepts as transnationalism, accented style, haptic visuality, interstitiality, hybridity, postcolonialism, cultural memory, double consciousness, etc.) and through which a tremendous number of films can be examined. As such, diaspora cinema becomes nothing more and nothing less than a heuristic term “*bon pour penser avec*”, to again adapt Levi-Strauss. It is a conceptual term to think “with”, not an object of study to think “about”. This does not mean that the concept becomes elusive or that it loses its meaning. It simply embodies an openness towards diasporic film practices that facilitates research that regards them in their complete latitude, without imposing upon them “the burden of representation” (Julien and Mercer 4). From this stance, we can scrutinise how and to what extent a film can be regarded as diasporic in the same way that films can be regarded as nationalist. A film can be diasporic based on the biographical identity of the filmmaker(s) (see the “diasporic optic”, “prosthetic memory”, etc.), the production context (“interstitial” modes of production, co-productions, etc.), the subject matter of the film (characters, spatial tropes, etc.), or a combination of these features. Each film can be analysed with great attention to its industrial, historical, socio-political, and cultural specificity and with appreciation for its multiplicity. Moreover, this approach allows for a more polycentric and rhizomatic positioning of migrant and diasporic film activities with regard to the complex interplay of the national versus the transnational, the local versus the global, the homeland versus the hostland, and the colonial past versus the alleged postcolonial present. I do not wish to present this optic as yet another pristine or impeccable truth, but I do believe that this conceptualisation allows for a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted tensions and dynamics surround diasporic film practices.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi draws on Marc Augé’s conceptualisation of “non-places” in migrant cinema as those places that “cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity”. These are places, created by late capitalism (e.g., hotel chains, train stations, airports, motorway stops, etc.) where people appear as anonymous passengers in transit (“Non-places” 677).

<sup>2</sup> The Other should be understood here as a discursive construct of the very colonial taxonomies that postcolonial theory aims to decode and denaturalise.

<sup>3</sup> According to Naficy, this “interstitial mode of production” is characterised by a convolution of the production process (as the different stages of the production process interlace in time), a multiplication or accumulation—instead of a division—of labour (as the filmmaker often operates in the role of producer, screenwriter, director, DOP and editor), multisource funding and co-production strategies; multilinguality on set, political or financial restraints that prolong the production process, artisanal conditions, etc. (*Accented Cinema* 46–56).

<sup>4</sup> Whereas Naficy described multilinguality as an aesthetic quality of the accented style, Berger and Komori speak of migration as “*an ideal setting for portraying bi- and plurilingual dialogues as well as culture contact and conflict on screen*” in their conceptualisation of “polyglot cinema” (8).

<sup>5</sup> The “diaspora space”, a concept introduced by Brah in her *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, is “inhabited not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous” (178). It addresses the global condition of culture, economics, and politics as a site of “migrancy” and “travel” which seriously problematises the subject position of the “native”.

<sup>6</sup> The concept of transvergence was introduced by Marcos Novak in his analysis of contemporary digital design. It is “associated with instability or fracture, and it challenges epistemologies of continuity and consistency” while advancing “translinearity” (Higbee, “Beyond” 85). This results in complexity, incompleteness, fragmentation, or even chaos.

<sup>7</sup> In their *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced the concept of the rhizome to point out a process of “relational and transversal thought” without having to trace the “roots” from which it was constructed as a fixed entity (6). The rhizome emerges in terms of multiplicity, in the absence of a centre or periphery, and in a non-hierarchical manner. Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other, and must be, yet there is no beginning nor end.

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### Suggested Citation

De Man, Alexander. "Reframing Diaspora Cinema: Towards a Theoretical Framework." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 25, 2023, pp. 24–39. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.25.02>.

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