



History of Transnational cinema and feminist film theory: understanding the potential of Transnational women's film

Asha Sara

Abstract

In order to understand the concept of transnational women's film, it is essential to look at both transnational film theory and feminist film theory independently from one another. I seek to deconstruct the two theories, their independent histories, goals, and roles within the field of film theory. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate the similarities of the two independent theories to make sense of how they form the concept of transnational women's film. I provide a close reading and analysis of Higbee and Lim's (2010) Concepts of Transnational Cinema and Patrice Petro's (2016) Classical Feminist Film Theory Then and (mostly) now. By way of this analysis, conclusions can be drawn on how the history of transnational film theory and feminist film theory has grown and evolved into transnational women's film. Analysis of both theories leads to the first discovery of their similarities in their development within academic study. Pointing at how both transnational film theory and feminist film theory found relevance as academic subjects begins the merger of transnational women's film as a relevant scholarly subject of inquiry. I then detail how the independent texts describe how the need for racialized and gendered thought enhanced their respective theories and impacted their development within film theory. By doing so, the authors of interest showcase the rich histories of these theories and how they can be used to understand the diverse and impactful background of transnational women's film. Furthermore, both sets of authors detail suggestions for further scholarship in their respective areas. Pointing to how the independent transnational and feminist film theory evolved into transnational women's film theory. From my critical analysis of the academic work of both Higbee and Lim and Petro on the history of their respective fields of thought, conclusions can be drawn on how transnational film and feminist film theory influenced the development of transnational women's film.

Keywords

transnational women's film, film theory, critical analysis, communications history



Introduction

Breaking down and examining the history of transnational cinema and feminist film theory provides a more robust understanding of transnational women's films. In *Concepts of Transnational Cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies*, Higbee and Lim (2010), through a critical and engaging discussion of how the national paradigm did not account for the more prominent factors at play in cross-border produced and viewed films, detailing the historical origins of the term 'transnational cinema.' In her foundational text, *Classical Feminist Film Theory Then and (mostly) now*, Patrice Petro (2016) provides readers with an analysis of feminist film theory. Petro (2016) highlights the history of feminist film theory as a once central, influential, and powerful force of the 1970s and 1980s film theory, to one that began to be perceived as self-absorbed, aloof in activism and political engagement, and cliché (p.16).

Similarities can be drawn between both articles. While Petro (2016) details the role feminist film theory had on the field of film scholarship, Higbee and Lim (2010) describe the evolution of transnational cinema as becoming its own distinct area of film study, thus solidifying the status of their perspective theories within the academic domain. The authors also outline the role diversity, and the globalized world plays in their areas of study (Petro, 2016; Higbee & Lim, 2010). Additionally, the authors suggest enhancing scholarship within their respective fields (Petro, 2016; Higbee & Lim, 2010). By outlining the many critical ways of thinking about and understanding both transnational cinema and feminist film theory, the two texts further audiences' spectatorship of transnational women's film by providing a greater cross-understanding of these two foundational concepts.

Rise In Scholarship

Enhancing understanding and spectatorship of transnational women's film can first be done by acknowledging the way transnational cinema and feminist film theory arose, independently of each other, as areas of scholarly study. In their writing, Higbee and Lim (2010) establish how transnational cinema has become an area of study: "Within the discipline of film studies, the concept of transnational cinema is certainly now an established area of inquiry" (p.8). The authors reference the increasing number of academic books and journals that utilize the term transnational cinema within the title (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p.8). The authors further detail, in their introduction,

that there has been a shift within scholars to transition from using 'transnational film,' as a word used to describe cross-border cinematic connections to a concept with dedicated journals that establish transnationalism as understanding the "production, consumption and representation of cultural identity in our interconnected, multicultural world" (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p. 8). Higbee and Lim (2010) also use their introduction to make explicit claims that there has been a momentous shift in the field's understanding and use of the transnational lens. Furthermore, as addressed by Higbee and Lim (2010), the changes made by scholars within the field to address the concept of transnationalism on a larger academic scale are akin to those made in the introduction of Petro's (2016) article.

Petro (2016) details a 2015 interview with Laura Mulvey in which Mulvey is asked what has changed since the publication of her now classical feminist film theory work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* which was published in 1975 (p. 15). Mulvey responds by saying, "one absolutely crucial change is that feminist film theory is now an academic subject to be studied and taught" (Petro, 2016, p.15). Petro (2016) uses her interview with Mulvey to preface her argument that from the 1970s to the 2010s, feminist film theory arose as an established area of academic study, becoming an increasingly common and ever-growing component of various academic curricula.

Both of the considered texts provide insights into the origins of transnational feminist film theory. Petro (2016) and Higbee and Lim (2010) address the importance of transnational feminist film theory by acknowledging and upholding their respective theories' status as areas of academic scholarship. Both texts set up the idea that these independent fields are relevant, important, and can be backed up by a notable amount of scholarship (Petro, 2016; Higbee & Lim, 2010). Despite the independence of these two works, we, as readers and spectators of transnational women's films, can deepen our understanding of these topics as being rooted in academic theory.

Dissatisfaction & Change

Higbee and Lim (2010) outline a shift in film scholarship from using transnationalism as a term to applying it as a theoretical lens. They locate this shift as a "wider dissatisfaction expressed by scholars working across the humanities" in using a national lens to make sense of film production, consumption, and representation of cultural identity in an expanding interconnected, multicultural world (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p.8). The national paradigm used within the field was

no longer satisfactory in analyzing the role transnational films play in shaping cultural identities and describing the cross-border means of production and consumption of films; therefore, a new way of thinking was needed for scholars to examine and address these concerns adequately. Higbee and Lim (2010) further develop the concept of transnational cinema by moving away from the Eurocentric readings of cross-border films and, instead, engaging in analyses grounded in cultural studies, postcolonial theory, and globalization studies (pp.7–9). Overall, the two authors paint a picture of transnational cinema as being informed by many diverse and inclusive theories and ideologies (Higbee & Lim, 2010). This enhances our understanding of transnational cinema as a concept with many different theoretical influences that further the diverse reading of cross-border films.

The need to apply a diverse lens to transnational film leading to a shift in its perception in the field, is similar to the phenomenon highlighted by Patricia Petro. Petro (2016) explains why a shift occurred in feminist film theory's centrality to film theory in the 1990s. Many criticisms have been leveled against feminist film theory, specifically in the writings of feminist film scholars, who denounce feminist film theory, not on epistemological grounds but because of its opacity and abstraction, its propensity towards jargon and cliché, and its aloofness from activism and political engagement (p.16).

This can be understood as the feminist film theories perceived lack of seriousness and ability to expand on meaningful engagement, impacting women at different socio-economic levels, as well as a lack of engagement with intersectionality. This lack of political engagement and activism led to a renouncing of feminist film theory by feminist film scholars, shifting the theory's centrality to the field of film theory. This phenomenon is similar to the reframing of transnational cinema as a theoretical concept that accounts for the diverse factors of cross-border film. Although Petro (2016) later paints feminist film theory in a positive light, she acknowledges the factors which caused the shift in the perception of feminist film theories and their centrality in film theory.

The similarities found in Higbee and Lim (2010) and Petro's (2016) texts are born out of a dissatisfaction towards the state of national film scholarship and feminist film theory. Both texts also maintain the view that the aforementioned theories could not account for greater social and power structures at play in the formation of films (Higbee & Lim, 2010; Petro, 2016). This helps us understand transnational feminist film theory as ever-changing and needing to continue to

account for new concepts that include more diverse perspectives of the ways in which different people experience the world. We can enhance our spectatorship of transnational women's films by critically engaging with how film depicts diversity, social and economic positions of power, and the real-world effects film has on activism and political engagement.

Newly Imagined Theories

After establishing the changes in perspective that led to their respective fields to account for feminism and transnational film differently, in both aforementioned articles, the authors make suggestions and contributions to the discussion on how to enhance both transnational film theory and feminist film theory (Higbee & Lim, 2010; Petro, 2016). Higbee and Lim (2010) propose the term "critical transnationalism" (p.17) to further evolve the conversations taking place in the field around the difference between the national and transnational paradigm. Critical transnationalism comes after addressing the concern that the term transnational could stand for a "potentially empty, floating signifier" (p.10). However, the authors do not wish to reject the term transnational altogether (Higbee & Lim, 2010). The aim of critical transnationalism is to engage with and challenge the conceptual term 'transnational' to "help us interpret more productively the interface between global and local, national and transnational, as well as moving away from a binary approach to national/transnational and from a Eurocentric tendency of how such films might be read" (Higbee & Lim, 2010, p.10). After engaging in conversation on the issues around national cinema and establishing how the concept of transnationalism can provide a better framework for cross-border cinema, Higbee and Lim (2010) take their discussion further by emphasizing that critical transnationalism is different from national cinema and needs to be addressed accordingly.

Petro (2016) makes a similarly styled argument in her text when she suggests a new way in which feminist film theory can be imagined to ensure its perception does not fall back to that of the 1990s, wherein the following phenomenon occurred: "we now have not only feminism without women but women without feminism, or rather, major feminist film theorists who no longer identify as such" (p.20). After detailing how feminist film theory has become de-central to film theory due to its perceived "aloofness" (Petro, 2016, p.16), Petro (2016) makes the argument that film feminism must renew its sense of purpose by forging bridges "between generations and to reclaim their contested history" (p.21). Petro (2016) engages with her review of feminist film theory history by suggesting how the field can grow and evolve. Her suggestions are also in line

with the criticism marked at the beginning of her text by renewing its sense of purpose, as in re-aligning with the political and activist communities it once was engaged with.

Petro's (2016) personal discussion on how film feminism could find itself once again central to film theory is similar to how Higbee and Lim (2010) discuss their tracing of transnational film history and the advancement of critical transnationalism. This connection can enhance our understanding of transnational women's films by showcasing ways we as viewers can critically analyze these theories' histories to engage in increasingly enhanced and nuanced conversation.

Conclusion

Petro (2016) does not shy away from ensuring her readers that "gender discrimination in the [film] industry is still rampant" (p.17) and that "it is important to [emphasize] once again that feminist film history gains nothing from disowning its origins" (p.22). She makes these statements to remind her readers that feminist film theory is a critical area of film theory and scholarship and that it is currently as worthy of our attention and scholarship as it was in the 1970s and 1980s (Petro, 2016). To reclaim its status as central to film theory, Petro (2016) acknowledges and suggests that feminist film theory reinvent itself for a new generation to do away with its previous perceptions, including not accounting for intersectionality. Despite the difference in tone, feminist film theory, as told by Patrice Petro (2016), contains similar themes to that of the evolving field of transnational cinema, told by Higbee and Lim (2010). The theme of being an area of diverse scholarly study is addressed as transnational cinema shifted towards deserving of its own realm of scholarship due to its involvement with diverse stories made up of diverse people. Higbee and Lim (2010) also suggest enhancing and differentiating scholarship in this area by establishing critical transnationalism, which is similar to suggestions made by Petro (2016) to re-establish feminist film theory for new generations. This analysis of Petro, Higbee, and Lim's texts enhances the spectatorship of transnational women's films by providing a breakdown and history of the respective areas of scholarship. This creates a deeper understanding of the rich histories, challenges, and independent topics both areas of study face so that when taken together in transnational women's film, viewers can critically engage with the content on a more meaningful level.

References

- Higbee, W., & Lim, S. H. (2010). Concepts of transnational cinema: towards a critical transnationalism in film studies. *Transnational Cinemas*, 1(1), 7-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1386/trac.1.1.7/1>
- Petro, P. (2016). Classic Feminist Film Theory then and (mostly) now. In Hole, K., Jelača, D., Kaplan, E., & Petro, P (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Cinema & Gender* (pp. 15-24). Taylor and Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315684062>