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Small Cinemas: How They Thrive and Why They Matter

By Mette Hjort

I have been working for some time now on developing an approach to cinema that would begin to recognize the significance of scale. The co-edited volume titled Purity and Provocation was a first step in this direction, and Small Nation, Global Cinema an attempt to take the project one step further.¹ The Cinema of Small Nations, co-edited with Duncan Petrie, was designed, through data assembled by a whole team of scholars (including such key figures as Dina Iordanova and Martin McLoone), to make possible a comparative analysis of small cinemas.² In the two interview books, Danish Directors and Danish Directors 2, the practitioner's interview is used as a means of arriving at an understanding of the challenges that filmmakers face as small-nation film professionals, and as a way of teasing out the strengths that are also potentially part of the ecology of small cinemas.³

There are many fellow travelers at this point, and it's almost beginning to make sense to talk of "small cinema studies." Cinema at the Periphery,⁴ edited by Dina Iordanova, David Martin-Jones, and Belén Vidal, comes to mind, but so does the conference "European Landscapes: Small Cinemas at the Time of Transition" (June 2010), organized by Janina Falkowska and her colleagues at the University of Western Ontario. I'm very grateful to Mediascape and META's Nilofar Naraghi and Heather Collette-VanDeraa for giving me an opportunity to try to pull my own thoughts about small cinemas together, and to articulate them in a succinct way. I'd like to do a number of things in this brief intervention. I'd like to try to clarify what I see a small cinemas' approach as foregrounding, and why I see such an approach as worthwhile. I'm also interested in spelling out what I see as the conditions that need to be met if a small cinema is to thrive. I would like to make a case for seeing small cinemas as a source of inspiring models of cinematic practice. Finally, I'm interested in suggesting that these models warrant affirmation, and that it makes sense to think of them as having relevance, not just for other small cinemas, but for film more generally.

Measures of scale

My interest in developing a small nations approach to cinema was shaped by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's work on the politics of recognition.⁵ I studied with Taylor many years ago at McGill University in Canada, and debated the issues with him at some length. What interested me about his influential politics of recognition piece was that it showed that there was a connection between the kind of nationalism that underwrote Québécois separatism and the identity politics engaged in, for example, by feminists, visible minorities, and queer communities. As a Dane who'd grown up in a former British colony (Kenya) and who had been briefly schooled in the UK, but also in Holland, I'd often felt that the problems of recognition to which scholar-activists involved in identity politics had drawn attention overlapped with the challenges faced by citizens of small countries. This, it seemed to me, was especially true for those individuals who were committed to forms of cultural production that were cost-intensive and required relatively large audiences to be sustainable. Without wishing to obscure important differences, I became interested in the idea of looking for parallels and connections that might allow for new solidarities and alliances.

My encounter with debates about recognition fueled my interest in trying to understand how scale impacts on cinematic practice, and I became particularly interested in the idea that it might be possible to identify challenges that small-nation filmmakers share by virtue of their status as small-nation filmmakers. I also became fascinated by the idea that some of the solutions devised by small-nation practitioners just might be transferable from one context to another (as the case of the manifesto-based Dogma 95 initiative and its Scottish "Advance Party" extension suggests).⁶ I continue to be excited about foregrounding questions of scale, in part because this kind of approach offers opportunities to think of the film scholar as potentially playing a role that involves a lot more than description and analysis. Film scholars who commit to the study of small cinemas, and who make central the challenges and the opportunities linked to matters of scale, may well be able, however modestly, to genuinely support the efforts of the relevant film practitioners. Film scholars can, for example, help to establish transnational networks and connections, and they can draw attention to workable models of cinematic practice, thereby facilitating their transfer from one small-nation context to another.

Drawing on work by sociologists, political theorists and other scholars, I have found it helpful to think of small cinemas in terms of four measures: population, GDP, territory, and a history of rule by non-co-nationals (as in contexts shaped by colonialism or by powerful

separatist aspirations).⁷ A cinema is not small in an absolute sense, for the very concept of small nationhood invites comparisons and contrasts. The point of these measures is that they help us to be attuned to, and thus to identify, the particular challenges that small-nation film practitioners are likely to be grappling with in any given case. In those cases where small nationhood is defined by all four measures (a small population, a low GDP, territory of a limited expanse, and a colonial history) the challenges are likely to be far greater – and in ways that to a significant extent are recurring and thus predictable – than in those cases where small nationhood is defined by only two of the four measures (a small population and a territory of only a limited expanse). In my experience, the measures of small nationhood that produce the greatest challenges are (a low) GDP and a history of colonial rule. Burkinabè filmmakers, that is, face greater challenges than Irish filmmakers, although Burkinabè and Irish filmmakers are all small-nation filmmakers who have something in common and something to gain from joining forces through various transnational alliances. Scholars in other fields have debated the question of whether it is possible to put a precise figure on what counts as small (in the case of population, for example), and proposals, some of them influential, along these lines have been made. An interesting question to consider in relation to film is whether there is a minimal threshold with regard to population, for example, that must be met for small-nation cinema even to make sense as a project. A micro-state like Iceland, with a population of 309,699, is of interest in this connection (although at the time of writing it is the specificity of the country's geography more than anything else that is salient!).

The conditions under which small cinemas thrive

I believe that it's possible to say something fairly precise about the conditions that allow small cinemas to thrive. There are many factors that could be singled out, but here are the ones that interest me the most: a rejection of a winner-take-all ethos; a commitment to "gift culture"; artistic leadership; widespread support for a philosophy of filmmaking that sees constraints as the basis for creativity; a commitment to partnering with likeminded practitioners in other national contexts for the purposes of making films and, just as importantly, if not more so, for the purposes of building capacity in various film-related areas.

A recurring challenge in small-nation contexts is the problem of "exit." Small-nation filmmakers who are talented, tenacious, and fortunate enough to achieve success with their filmmaking typically find themselves rewarded with significantly enhanced opportunities, usually in a well established film industry within a large nation. If small cinemas are to thrive it is imperative that film practitioners who succeed — directors, producers, cinematographers, actors, and editors — reject the winner-take-all ethos that supports the idea of using success as a purely personal platform for even greater rewards. What small cinemas need in order to be able to thrive is successful practitioners who are willing to put their success, and the rewards that accompany it, to work in their small-nation context, through collaborative projects involving, among other things, "gift culture": gifts of reputation, experience, and talent that together become gifts of opportunity to the film community more generally.

Small cinemas that thrive all have filmmakers who are able and willing to function as artistic leaders, and who understand just how important it is to take up tasks that go well beyond the mere making of films. Examples of artistic leadership include the articulation of artistic initiatives that speak directly to the challenges of small-nation filmmaking, as was the case with Lars von Trier's cost-cutting, attention-generating, and creativity-enhancing Dogma 95 rules. Artistic leadership can also take the form of developing projects that help to fill various gaps resulting from inadequate cultural policy or limited state support. A case in point is "Advance Party," a three-film project with rules specified by Lars von Trier, in response to Scottish producer Gillian Berrie's account of the challenges facing Scottish film professionals and her request for an initiative that would do for Scotland what Dogma 95 had done for Denmark. Burkinabè filmmaker Gaston Kaboré is another excellent example of what I have in mind when I speak of artistic leaders. Kaboré has long insisted that it is not enough, as a successful African filmmaker, simply to make films. In 2003, Kaboré established "Imagine" as an alternative to the traditional conservatoire-style film school. Kaboré sees "Imagine" as a direct response to the classic small-nation problem of institutional deficits in the area of film and education, deficits that result in inadequate local expertise and that entail a highly problematic dependence on non-local film practitioners.

Constraints, in the form of recurring challenges, are a defining feature of the milieus that produce small-nation cinemas. Film practitioners can choose to be defeatist about such constraints as limited funds, the availability of only a small pool of talented actors, and the limited reach of a given small-nation language, or they can choose to look for ways of framing constraints as opportunities. Senegalese Ousmane Sembène is a good example of a filmmaker who developed a philosophy of filmmaking that was informed, through and through, by the idea that creativity is stimulated not by untrammelled freedom but by clearly defined constraints. Sembène's philosophy of filmmaking also clearly encompasses the thought that filmmakers located outside the major filmmaking centers have to become adept at reframing the constraints of their situation as creative opportunities. Françoise Pfaff quotes Sembène as saying:

I think that a lack of means forces us to certain savings and to the use of a lot of imagination. As far as I am concerned, this situation helps me. Each time I make a film, I have to figure things out and see whether or not I am able to decrease expenses. I have to think about short cuts, and the work implied to achieve all this. Don't be mistaken, in film, the abundance of means may also be harmful.⁸

If we look to Sembène's career as a filmmaker we find countless examples of his turning what Jon Elster calls "imposed" constraints into opportunities.⁹ The lack of means to which Sembène refers meant, for example, that he could not work with expensive stars and trained actors. Far from seeing this as a serious problem, Sembène saw this particular constraint as an opportunity to de-colonize the cinema, and to develop an African cinema that reflected African traditions and African realities. Stars and professional actors were often, as Pfaff puts it, "saturated with western culture," whereas non-professional actors "remain[ed] faithful to traditional African performance."¹⁰ Elaborate soundtracks, so typical of the costly productions of affluent large nations, are resource-intensive, and here too a lack of means

turned out to be more of an opportunity than an obstacle for Sembène. An important element in the distinctive style that characterizes Sembène's films is the use of silence as a sound effect. Sembène rejected some of the more typical ways in which music is used in western cinema, and especially the "wall-to-wall" phenomenon that is often a feature of commercial productions.¹¹ For Sembène, silence was both a means of dealing with the constraint of limited budgets and a means of developing a cinematic style that reflected African realities. The point is that small-nation filmmaking milieus are more likely to be vital, and thus sustainable, if they emphasize — experientially through practice, and discursively, through practice-oriented conversations and such meta-cultural framings as interviews and manifestos — a capacity to make restrictions the very basis for cinematic traits that are affirmed as constitutive of a distinctive approach or style, whether in a single work or across works. The last factor that I consider crucial in small-nation contexts is a pervasive willingness to develop certain kinds of partnerships. Since this factor produces two of the models of transnational practice that I find particularly promising, I shall take it up separately, in the next section.

Models worth affirming: affinitive and milieu-building transnationalisms

Transnationalism has focused the energies of a lot of film scholars in recent times, with some very good results. As part of an attempt to understand what might count as a transnational phenomenon worth affirming, I have tried to work out a typology of cinematic transnationalisms.¹² Of the various types that I was able to identify, two struck me as being motivated by goals that were particularly worthwhile. I use the term "affinitive transnationalism" to refer to cross-border solidarities and collaborative endeavors that find a starting point in a reciprocal sense of affinity. In some instances that affinity finds a basis in shared ethnicities, in partially overlapping languages, or in geographic proximity and what it makes possible. In other cases, affinity is a matter of shared problems, aspirations, and values. For example, affinity may be derived from shared problems related to the challenges of small nationhood; from common aspirations to participate in a global public sphere on terms that are not culturally demeaning or distorting; and from overlapping, value-driven preferences for collaborative and inclusive social practices. The second kind of affinity (based on shared problems, aspirations, and values) is, I believe, particularly promising, because it allows, in the case of small cinemas, for partnerships between geographically remote parts of the world. It allows, in short, for solidarities between contexts that count as small, in various ways and to varying degrees. "Milieu-building transnationalism," a second particularly promising type of transnationalism, involves cross-border partnerships focused on activities that are envisaged as long-term and recurring, and that are designed to build capacity, often on a regional basis. In many cases, milieu-building transnationalism finds a basis in affinity, and as a result, an instance of milieu-building transnationalism frequently turns out also to be an instance of affinitive transnationalism.

Let me give just one quick example of an initiative that brings together these two types of transnationalism. To be held in June 2010, in Tunisia, on the island of Djerba, "Beyond Borders" is a capacity-building initiative aimed at creative producers. The programme is jointly organized by Rod Stoneman, Director of the Huston School of Film & Digital Media in Galway, Ireland (Galway, Ireland)," and by Gaston Kaboré, who directs Imagine. "Beyond Borders" brings two small nations into dialogue, but only as a starting point for exchanges that are far more encompassing. What is more, "Beyond Borders" is explicitly framed in terms of a rejection of colonial models that resulted in Africans having to travel to Europe and elsewhere in order to receive training. "Beyond Borders" is described by organizers Rod Stoneman and Gaston Kaboré as "original and innovative" in that it "offers creative producer training to Europeans and Africans on an equal footing," thereby providing a "productive basis for exchange and for the development of networks of creative producers around the world."¹³ "Beyond Borders" is but one of several collaborative endeavors involving Stoneman and Kaboré, and can thus be seen as building on the kind of long-term solidarity that is a feature of milieu-building transnationalism. Kaboré is, for example, a key figure at the Film/Making/Thinking symposium (Huston School of Film & Digital Media, May 2010) that is part of an ongoing research project on film schools (conservatoire-style and alternative) spearheaded by the School in Galway (Stoneman), the University of York (Duncan Petrie) and Lingnan University (Hjort).

Doing more with less: small cinemas as charting a path towards environmentally responsible filmmaking

What has yet to be recognized is that small cinemas are worth studying because they have much to offer that is of interest, and not just to citizens of small nations. It is my hope that those of us who are working on small cinemas will be able to argue this point effectively in the near future. Take the example of sustainable cinema. Hollywood, as Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller have shown, has one of the most appalling environmental track records imaginable.¹⁴ And if we, in addition to considering the matter of environmental impact, also begin to ask questions about how resources are allocated in this world that we ultimately all share, then the picture becomes, it seems to me, even gloomier. When I recently converted the cost of producing *Avatar* from American to Hong Kong dollars (for teaching purposes), I ended up with a figure so long that it wouldn't fit on a single line in my Power Point presentation. To anyone familiar with the circumstances of small-nation filmmaking, sums of that size are disquieting, and the day may well come soon when small cinemas will be seen as having paved the way for more environmentally sustainable forms of cinematic production and for resource allocations that make some ethical, political, and prudential sense within the larger scheme of things.

Small-nation film practitioners are accustomed to doing "more with less." Indeed, "less" is one of those imposed constraints that they systematically transmute into various types of value: aesthetic, political, cultural and other. In some instances, doing more with less is made possible by digital technology, hardly a green technology, but there are many other examples of how doing more with less becomes the basis for environmentally sustainable practices. For example, at one point, Peter Aalbæk Jensen, co-founder with von Trier of Zentropa, and the company's most influential producer, generated a manifesto-like statement entitled something like "Rules to be followed by scriptwriters who want their films to be produced." In a book celebrating the 40th anniversary of the National Film School of Denmark, scriptwriter Kim Fupz Aakeson provides a description of these rules, as he remembers them:

Your film takes place no more than 16 kilometers from the Town Hall in Copenhagen. Your film takes place indoors. Your film takes place during the day. Your film takes place in the present. Two actors are twice as good as four actors. That sort of thing. I think there were ten points in all. It was all about money, about understanding that films cost money to produce, that some things are cheap and other things are expensive, and that it makes more sense to shoot in town than to drive the entire crew to Møn and spend an hour and a half doing it. Each way. About the weather, that tends to get in the way when you are shooting outdoors. About salaries, which are lower during the day than at night. About four actors costing twice as much as two.¹⁵

Jensen's "rules" clearly demonstrate that there are environmental gains to be had from the kind of practices that make sense in small-nation contexts. And yet, small-nation practitioners have yet to think about these environmental gains in any kind of systematic or deep way. Perhaps film scholars can help in this regard?

In sum, for me, the emphasis on small nationhood is about:

- understanding the challenges that small-nation filmmakers face
- highlighting the extent to which a large number of these challenges are shared challenges
- encouraging filmmakers to look for the opportunities that may be implicit in the constraints they encounter
- encouraging small-nation filmmakers to look to each other for support, rather than to large nations
- encouraging solidarity across borders and through various lasting partnerships
- facilitating knowledge transfer across borders and especially the transfer of models that provide solutions to shared problems
- looking to small cinemas for approaches that warrant adoption even in the context of large cinemas, and this on social, political, and ethical (including environmental) grounds.

The small-nations approach, as I understand it, involves both a descriptive and a prescriptive dimension. The aim, that is, is to describe the challenges and circumstances of small-nation filmmaking as accurately as possible. At the same time, there's also an aspiration here, through analysis, to identify the practices that allow small-nation filmmakers to meet shared challenges in the best possible way. The point of this kind of analysis is ultimately to encourage a broad awareness of practices that work, with an eye to transforming these practices into cultural and artistic resources that are transferable to other contexts. As a result of the emphasis on scale, the film scholar's work extends well into the domain of advocacy, and also into the area of policy, be it top-down and state-driven or bottom-up and practitioner-driven. The more capacious conception of the film scholar's role, tasks, and contributions which is afforded by an engagement with small cinemas, is, I think, ultimately quite helpful. This is especially the case for those of us who work in university systems where the value of fields of study cannot be taken for granted but must be argued for, and defended, in terms of knowledge transfer, relevance to society, and so on. It can be hard to make the case for thematic commentaries on films. It is much easier to make the case for analyses of small-nation cinemas which aim to show that there are environmental gains (among many other things) to be won from a wider dissemination and adoption of small-nation practices.

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NOTES

1. Hjort, Mette and Scott MacKenzie, eds. Purity and Provocation: Dogma 95. London: BFI Publications, 2003; Hjort, Mette. Small Nation, Global Cinema. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
2. Hjort, Mette and Duncan Petrie, eds. The Cinema of Small Nations. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
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4. Iordanova, Dina, David Martin-Jones & Belén Vidal, eds. Cinema at the Periphery. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010.
5. Taylor, Charles. "The Politics of Recognition." Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition." Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992.
6. Hjort, Mette. "Affinitive and Milieu-Building Transnationalism: The Advance Party Initiative." Cinema at the Periphery. Eds. Iordanova, Dina, David Martin-Jones & Belén Vidal. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010.
7. Hjort and Petrie. "Introduction." The Cinema of Small Nations. 3-7.
8. Pfaff, Françoise. Cinema of Ousmane Sembène: A Pioneer of African Film. Santa Barbara, CA.: Greenwood Press, 1984. 77.
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10. Ibid. 53, 55.
11. Ibid. 63.
12. Hjort, Mette. "On the plurality of cinematic transnationalism." World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives. Eds. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman. London: Routledge, 2010.
13. See the pamphlet promoting the programme.
14. Maxwell, Richard and Toby Miller. "Film and the Environment: Risk Off-Screen." Film and Risk. Ed. Mette Hjort (forthcoming).
15. Aakeson, Kim Fupz. "Honey, I'm Home." At lære kunsten: 40 år med Filmskolen. Ed. Ole John. Copenhagen: Aschehoug/Den Danske Filmskole, 2006.

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Dr. Mette Hjort is Chair Professor and Head of the Department of Visual Studies at the Liberal Arts University of Hong Kong, Lingnan University, and Affiliate Professor of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. She holds a PhD (Centre de Recherches sur les Arts et le Langage) from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Her published research encompasses aesthetics, film studies, and theatre studies. She is the author of [Small Nation, Global Cinema](#) (University of Minnesota Press) and [The Strategy of Letters](#) (Harvard University Press). She is also the editor or co-editor of [Instituting Cultural Studies](#) (with Meaghan Morris, Hong Kong UP, forthcoming), [Film and Risk](#) (Wayne State University Press, forthcoming), [Rules and Conventions](#) (Johns Hopkins University Press,), [Emotion and the Arts](#) (with Sue Laver, Oxford University Press), [Cinema and Nation](#) (with Scott MacKenzie, Routledge), [Purity and Provocation](#) (with Scott MacKenzie, BFI), [The Postnational Self](#) (with Ulf Hedetoft, University of Minnesota Press), [The Cinema of Small Nations](#) (with Duncan Petrie, Edinburgh University Press), and [Dekalog 01: On The Five Obstructions](#) (Wallflower). Professor Hjort has also published a couple of interview books with filmmakers (one of them with Eva Jørholt and Eva Novrup Redvall) and translated two books by French art historian Louis Marin. A strong advocate of engaging practitioners in scholarly debates about film, she is working on two more interview books with filmmakers, one of them with Chinese documentary filmmakers (and with an accompanying documentary film).