

Transnational Narratives of Identity and the Intermedial: The Uses of Television in *Slumdog Millionaire*

Abstract

With reference to Lucia Nagib's work on the Intermedial and Intercultural, this paper will examine the ways in which Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* uses a transnational TV 'Super Format' to demarcate national and transnational narratives of identity. It will examine the processes of reinscription involved, both in transnational TV formats and narratives of identity, but it will also consider the politics of intermediality in relation to the film and its portrayal of temporary transnational spaces and identities.

Introduction

This paper will examine the ways in which the film *Slumdog Millionaire* employs intermediality as a means of demarcating national and transnational narratives of identity. It will also consider how this process raises questions concerning political agency in the film and in the object of intermediality. In these respects, the intermedial element of the film will be understood as the quiz show, or the reference to the global/transnational television format of *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?*.

This intermedial approach to the film is partly influenced by the work of Lucia Nagib, whose collection of essays, *Impure Cinema: Intermedial and Intercultural Approaches To Film* (2014), not only makes the claim that "intermedial studies are necessarily Intercultural" (2014; 26) and transnational, but that the intermedial is also the site of politics and of crisis in film. And with reference to Laura Marks, Nagib also suggests that the experimental style of intermediality also represents "the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge." (xxiv). Whilst Nagib uses examples of Japanese films (national cinema) as a means of "disassociating politics from the 'Classical-Modern' debate" (21), and therefore to transcend western-oriented hegemony over descriptions of modernity, all of these points are of particular interest with regard to the film *Slumdog Millionaire* – itself, a film that illustrates how national cinema is being re-inscribed by transnational and global cultural pressures. By applying Nagib's theory of the intermedial to *Slumdog Millionaire*, the hope is to illuminate also the dynamics of what Nagib calls "the political object' of the intermedial – in this case, the global/ transnational television format – and also the aesthetic and representational politics of transnational narratives of identity, and the related area of what Graham Huggan refers to as "Transnational Culture" (2013; 81).

In conclusion, the paper will consider how the popularity of the film, the ways in which the film uses a global/transnational television format as an element of intermediality, and the processes of re-inscription seen in transnational narratives of identity, may point to, what Miriam Hansen has referred to in her seminal work, 'The Mass Production of the Senses', as a response to modernity through a "global vernacular" (1999; 68). In these respects, the intermedial element of a global/transnational television format in the film is significant, not only because it alludes to the nature of politics in the film itself, but also to the nature of a "translatable and transnational resonance" (Hansen, 1999; 68) in contemporary culture.

Transnational Narratives of Identity

My own research, across popular fictions and non-fiction, identified some recurring features of contemporary transnational narratives of identity: these types of narratives often describe identities that are entered into on a temporary basis, or which are situated within transnational spaces that Jackson, Crang & Dywer suggest are "*complex, multidimensional, and multiply inhabited...and often entered into "momentarily"*" (2004; 3); these narratives are often personal life-narratives; they often describe the negotiating of borders or boundaries, and they often also involve what Graham Huggan describes as "Self-Exoticization" (2013; 82). But virtually all of these narratives are involved in a process of describing what it means to be modern - either directly or obliquely. More details of this last theme will be given in the intermedial analysis of this paper, but it is a theme that is significant with regard to both *Slumdog Millionaire* and the transnational.

In these respects, Huggan's descriptions of transnational culture are also worth considering. Huggan's term, 'self-exoticization', is largely related to postcolonial studies in and around Asian culture. And it is also often seen placed side by side with arguments concerning 'Re-Orientalism' – a charge that has been leveled at *Slumdog*, but the term itself can be employed to describe practices and processes elsewhere. We see elements of this idea in many western television fictions as well as non-fictions and light entertainment programmes, that have proven to be translatable (and transnational) through their adoption and adaptation by various national broadcasters across the globe. Global and transnational television formats such as *Pop Idol*, *Who Do You Think You Are*, and others deal with a certain amount of self-exoticization because as Huggan explains, "Self-Exoticization is effectively, an awareness of 'cultural difference' as a global commodity..." (2013; 83). In these respects, the intermedial element in *Slumdog* – the local re-inscription of a global/transnational television format – can be understood, not just in terms of standardization and homogeneity, but in terms of a reflexivity that as Hansen suggests "can take different forms and different affective directions" (Hansen, 1999; 70) allowing audiences to confront a transnational modernity within their own local

contexts and constitutions. This is not to say that cultural hegemony is not present in some form or other however.

Huggan's other descriptions of transnational culture, that "The 'transnational' is positioned somewhere between the 'postcolonial' and the 'global'...", finds some form of representation in the film, in particular the localizing of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*. Similarly, Huggan's claim that "transnationalism is a function of the very category ('nation') it contests", can be discerned through the changing ideas of nation and community in the film. And most revealingly, with regard to the intermedial element, "A transnational approach... complicates reified distinctions between 'domestic' and 'foreign' perceptions... distinctions that help keep the whole machinery of exoticist representation in place." (2013; 82).

In all these respects It is worth bearing in mind the level of criticism the film received in some quarters in relation to concepts of 'Re-Orientalism', 'New-Colonialism', and other similar charges, because the machinery of exoticist representation is ever-present in the film. However, if we consider the politics of the film to lie in the intermedial – the television quiz show - the dynamics of criticism potentially change and their focus placed elsewhere. Here, the intermedial reveals not only a site of politics that may have been overlooked, but it may also reveal something about how global/transnational television works, and how it is perceived. What complicates these criticisms further is that the film is an adaptation of an Indian Short Story by an Indian author – *Q&A* by Vikas Swarup (2005). Here is not the place to consider the criticisms of the film in depth, but it can be argued the site of this crisis in representation and identity lies not in the interrogation scenes, nor in the so-called 'poverty-porn' scenes of the largely national narrative, but in the intermedial element of the film – the alluded-to global/transnational television format, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. It is here where the nation is contested, where the complications of domestic and foreign perceptions are reified, and where the machinery of exoticist representation takes place.

The Intermedial

These features of transnational culture are significant to the film, and more importantly, the ways in which the film employs the intermedial as a means of re-inscribing national narratives into transnational narratives of identity. Of interest here is how transnational approaches and re-inscription, as seen in the intermedial element, also describes processes of what it means to be modern. As stated earlier, this is either done directly or obliquely. A Case in point can be seen in the way the film demarcates its narrative almost from the beginning. In the opening shot of the film we are confronted by Jamal's interrogation. It is a crisis point. A crisis of identity (Jamal is asked if he has a name). The film then moves between the quiz show – the intermedial - and the police interrogation, indicating straight away two narratives or forms of representation that suggest a move from one modernity to another modernity, the national to

the global/transnational. Jamal's interrogation -ostensibly a nation narrative - allows Jamal, through the description of his life leading up to his arrest, to directly draw parallels to the modernizing of Mumbai and of Indian society as a whole. Then we have the quiz show narrative (the intermedial), where being modern is related to obliquely through participation in a global/transnational television format, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. As Nagib states, recourse to different media in film suggests both a crisis in the medium (film) itself, and in the "power of representation" (37) in the narrative. Here I want to suggest the recourse to *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* suggests a crisis or 'dissensus' in representing the nation, and as a consequence, the nation is re-inscribed through global and transnational processes. Here I do not want to suggest the nation-as-bad and transnational-as-good, because as I hope to explain, the transnational/global, as depicted in the film through the intermedial is the site of crisis or dissensus.

Following Nagib's theory of the intermedial in film as example, this same narrative division can also be used to explain what Nagib, in reference to Ranciere, describes as two regimes of meaning in film – the 'Representational', and the 'Aesthetic' regime (Nagib, 2014; 30). In other words, the film's nation narrative, through Jamal's interrogation, is the 'Representational' regime, and the quiz show, the intermedial, is the 'Aesthetic' regime – what Nagib describes as the 'true' site of politics in the film because it "suspends the pedagogical character of representational narratives (in the film, the interrogation) by introducing a dilemma or 'Dissensus'" (31) .

Here, in Nagib's words, "it is intermediality that ushers in the aesthetic regime" (P. 37), suggesting both a crisis in the medium itself (film), but more significantly in terms of transnational narratives of identity, it is the aesthetic regime that introduces 'Dissensus' – a political response to convention (traditional hierarchies/caste system) and consensus (nation narratives). The intermedial introduces a crisis and a dilemma that in its act of transcending genre and format not only can be read interculturally and transnationally, but "abolishes hierarchies between different forms" (Stam, 2005; 17). In other words, the intermedial introduces metaphorical procedures that not only allude to the transcending of hierarchies and boundaries in culture and society, but which as Nagib states, "merge national and regional traits into a single global trend." (27).

Therefore, the site of politics in *Slumdog Millionaire*, lies not in the representational regime, the nation narrative as portrayed through Jamal's interrogation, but in the aesthetic regime - the quiz show scenes, the intermedial element that is a global/transnational television format, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*. Any examination of the politics of the film should therefore take into consideration the dynamics and aesthetics of the intermedial element itself, how it relates to the film, its resonance with an audience, and what meanings it may offer. In this case,

understanding the dynamics, aesthetics, resonance, and symbolic meanings of a global/transnational television 'super' format is significant, both in terms of the film itself, but also to an understanding of transnational narratives of identity and the dynamics of transnational culture

The Political Object and the Intermedial: *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* and Global/Transnational Television Formats

If the intermedial is the site of politics, of crisis, and of dissensus in film, then analysis of the political object of the intermedial is necessary. Analysis of *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* through its use in the film, and as part of an aesthetic regime in the film, may provide a different dimension to the understanding of how these television formats work and create appeal within the wider context of a global vernacular. What role do these television formats play in responding to, or in describing the conditions of a contemporary modernity?

To date, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* has been sold to 150 countries world-wide. It is the most popular television format in a long list of television formats sold globally, and as such, the popularity of these formats suggest a translatable and transnational resonance that may go toward explaining contemporary culture. Andrea Esser, in her essay "*Format Is King*": *Television Formats and Commercialisation* (2013), discusses not only the dimensions of how these programmes travel globally, but also why local/national broadcasters decide to adopt/buy these formats for domestic consumption. First, it has to be noted that the production and movement of these formats is uneven. At the time of writing, Esser notes that countries such as America and the UK were predominantly format developers/exporters, whereas countries such as Germany, and others (she gives the example of Germany), are largely "format importer[s]" (Esser, 2013; 155).

This uneven dynamic in the production, flow, and consumption of cultural experience and cache could be seen as a new form of cultural hegemony or western hegemony, and although Esser points out some benefits (for local broadcasters at least) of the format trade – that it has opened up markets previously off limits, such as America – local/national broadcasters take/buy not only the programme itself, but arguably the cultural and social values of the exporting country also. If the intermedial is the site of crisis and of dissensus in *Slumdog Millionaire?*, then perhaps this imposition or acculturation of western values could be a indicator of the nature of this crisis and its relevance to identity.

This is a dimension of the television format that Esser further alludes to in her description of why broadcasters buy certain formats, most notably that they "constitute a major brand and hence something the broadcaster [and audience?] would like to be associated with..." (159). In some respects, wanting to be associated with a popular global brand, and acquiring the brand

could be understood as just one form of modernization – a description of what it means to be modern. The juxtaposition of the narrative and the intermedial in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, describes a culture associating itself with a global brand in a complex local/global nexus concerning identity.

Other examples given by Esser describe how these formats, “Offer a proven track record in other countries, thereby minimizing risk” (159); that “in an evermore fragmenting media landscape [they] offer a ‘together moment’” (160); and “some formats create a comprehensible must-have mentality in the global television industry” (160). Not only can we read into these descriptions the highways and byways of global and transnational television formats, but the transnational nature and flows of cultural knowledge and production. As Esser states, some of the negative sides of the format trade, and its increasing popularity with local/global audiences, is the possibility that “particular local issues no longer find representation on television”, and that there may be a diluting of identity and belief systems – that the local will “merely show at the surface, reflected in faces, dialects, locations and some geographically bound conventions” (166). The quiz show, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, as depicted in the film, raises all these concerns and dilemmas (dissensus), and does so in relation to the nation and to national narratives. Local issues are sidelined, but we also see how the programme offers Jamal an opportunity to transcend his social status – albeit, reluctantly. It is the site of crisis in the film, and dialectically so. So does the film tell us anything about global/transnational television? And does global/transnational television tell us anything about transnational culture? In the film, the television quiz show reveals that global/transnational television formats operate within uneven economic and cultural flows, and that they are still susceptible to local cultural pressures – corrupt or not. But the film also suggests these formats to be part of some cultural ideal, that they reify global modernity and transnational relations at an aesthetic and symbolic level.

And if, as Esser states, these formats offer a ‘together moment’, then the film suggests this as only a temporary condition that is equally “*complex, multidimensional, and multiply inhabited...*” (Crang, et al, 2004; 3). Transnational processes of re-inscription have an impact on national identities because it forces broadcasters to re-evaluate what national identities are. This can be seen in the film and in the move to the intermedial. On another note, Esser’s observation that these formats offer a “minimizing of risk” (159) is particularly interesting as one of the film’s themes is risk. Here the theme of risk can be related to concepts of a Risk Culture (Beck 2000), and whilst risk culture can have a homogenizing effect, the strategies for dealing with risk often vary at a local level. In the film, the television format and its strategy for minimizing risk may represent and reflect, in a metaphorical sense, not only what Esser describes as a “fragmenting media landscape”, but a fragmenting national and cultural landscape.

It can be argued that the move to the intermedial in *Slumdog Millionaire* produces dissensus and at an aesthetic level, a reification of the transnational. Here not only is the nation contested, but also the transnational itself, and global/transnational television in particular. In *Slumdog Millionaire* the intermedial element is where domestic and foreign perceptions are complicated, and where the reflexive awareness of cultural difference and self-exoticization is not so much aimed at being a global commodity (although it becomes that), but at allowing audiences to confront a transnational modernity within their own local contexts and constitutions. In these last respects I refer to Miriam Hansen's work on vernacular modernity because the television format *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* is significant, not because of its mobilization of "universal narrative templates" but because it mediates dissensus through "competing cultural discourses on modernity and modernization" (Hansen, 1999; 68).

So in *Slumdog Millionaire* the raising of the political through the intermedial is directly linked to the object of the intermedial – global/transnational television.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by reading intermediality as the site of politics and crisis in *Slumdog Millionaire*, we can extend this to consider the ways in which global/transnational television formats have come to reify this crisis or these politics not only on an aesthetic and symbolic level, but within contemporary culture. Here, the term 'crisis' largely refers to crisis in the film medium itself, or doubts surrounding cinematic representation. But I have also used it in a metaphorical sense, as indeed Nagib does in relation to her study of Japanese film. I have also been guided by Stam's observation that "intermedial studies are necessarily Intercultural in so far as they contribute "to 'de-segregate' and 'transnationalize' criticism itself" (Nagib, 2014; 26). In these respects, the use of a global/transnational television format in *Slumdog Millionaire* offers an opportunity not only to examine its use in the film, but also to consider why these formats have become significant to the production of identity and meaning in contemporary culture, and especially with regard to transnational narratives of identity. This is where Miriam Hansen's work on vernacular modernity/modernism and *The Mass Production of the Senses* (1999) becomes significant. The intermedial in *Slumdog Millionaire* reifies a global vernacular in which self-exoticization, the negotiating and transcending of boundaries, and the contestation of the nation as a unit of meaning or knowledge, act as metaphors for a contemporary culture marked by transnational networks and connections. The intermedial also presents a dilemma about national identity (dissensus), and in this respect we can view global/transnational television formats as producing a new sensory culture that has a "transnational and translatable resonance" (Hansen, 1999; 68) in the same way that Hansen described the mass appeal of classic Hollywood films.

My argument that these formats in general and transnational narratives of identity in particular describe what it means to be modern can be considered in relation to both Nagib's work on the intermedial in film, and Hansen's examination of a vernacular modernity. Nagib issues a caution about describing cinema in terms of modernity (hence her recourse to intermediality), in that she observes, via Tom Gunning, that the term itself could refer to almost anything and becomes almost a "universal reference [and] therefore meaningless" (Nagib, 2015; 8). Instead, Gunning suggests that cinema often makes "a claim about modernity" (Nagib, 2015; 8), and in this instance, I want to suggest global/transnational television formats do so too. Interestingly, however, it is largely through the intermedial in *Slumdog Millionaire* where we get to see just what this claim might be.

This takes me to Hansen's ideas of a sensory culture and global vernacular, because Hansen's example of the global transnational appeal of the Slapstick genre in classical Hollywood can easily be compared to the appeal of contemporary Light Entertainment genre in television. Just as Hansen makes the case for slapstick's appeal not being about universal narrative templates of humour, but in its ability to tap into vernacular "reflexive dimensions", and providing "a site for engaging the conflicts and pressures of a multiethnic society..." (69), so the light entertainment genre of global/transnational television formats offers something similar. In the case of contemporary television formats, their vernacular reflexivity might provide a site for engaging the conflicts and pressures of transnational and global culture and society.

And just as Hansen describes Hollywood as producing a new "global sensorium", so in terms of transnational narratives of identity, these television formats also appeal in their ability to "provide models of identification for being modern" (Hansen, 1999; 70). If global/transnational television formats suggest standardization, homogeneity, and hegemony, they also describe diverse ways of local re-inscription, and in these respects intermediality provides an intercultural and transnational approach to understanding the vernacular dimensions of global forms.

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