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FILM-PHILOSOPHY

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## Ungrounding the Narrative of Nation

Review: David Martin-Jones (2006)  
*Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity:  
Narrative Time in National Contexts*  
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David Martin-Jones's *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* is an ambitious work. A book that proposes a wider application of Deleuze's cinema within Anglo-American film studies, despite the ambiguous position occupied by the French philosopher's body of work within the discipline. A monograph that attempts to offer a reassessment of the movement- and time-image through an analysis of national cinema, when, as Martin-Jones himself acknowledges 'the localised historical dimension of the nation' (8), appears largely absent from Deleuze's work. Finally, *Deleuze Cinema and National Identity* argues for the application of a Deleuzian philosophy of cinema to transnational 'hybrid genre' films (most obviously in relation to films from East Asian cinemas) when

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Deleuze's *Cinema 1* (1983) and *Cinema 2* (1985) are (in-)famous for their privileging of particular movements and moments in film history that tend to be viewed as indissociable from European art cinema (1920s Soviet Montage; the pre-war French school; German Expressionism; Italian neo-realism).

Despite (or perhaps precisely because of) these obstacles, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* is nonetheless a timely addition to the ever-expanding list of Film Studies titles that draw on various strands of Deleuzian philosophy, and for at least two reasons. First, because it refuses to analyse the movement- and time-images as seemingly discrete entities. Secondly, due to the book's focus on narrative form and national identity. In his analysis, Martin-Jones privileges the recent emergence of an increasing number of 'hybrid' popular genre films that employ a fractured or fragmented narrative structure, allowing us to reassess how narrative time in cinema can be used to narrate national identity.

Although a conscious manipulation of temporality through multiple, parallel or fractured narrative form has been present in European art cinema for many years – Martin-Jones offers *81/2* (Fellini, 1963) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (Resnais, 1961) as earlier examples from the post-1945 period – it is certainly true that the past ten years have witnessed an increasing number of these fragmented narratives creeping into mainstream filmmaking across the globe. Martin-Jones is not the first scholar to write about this 'new' phenomenon of fractured or 'network' narratives in contemporary film (in the context of American cinema see, for example, King [2005], Bordwell [2002] and Thompson [1999]<sup>1</sup>). Nor, as he openly admits (39-40) by citing the example of Pisters' work on *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1996) and *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) in *The Matrix of Visual Culture* (2003), is he the first to apply Deleuze to an analysis of these labyrinthine narrative films.

Where *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* comes into its own, though, is through its application of an approach that combines Deleuzian concepts of how cinema represents time and memory with a sustained analysis of questions

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<sup>1</sup> Martin-Jones does acknowledge two of these authors in his book.

of national identity in cinema, and a detailed consideration of how, to borrow Homi K. Bhabha's phrase, such films 'narrate the nation'. This is arguably the book's most original and innovative contribution to Film and Deleuze Studies, for reasons I will outline at the end of this review article. It is also an approach that comes with its own problems (which are, in many ways, accentuated by Martin-Jones's choice of films for his case studies in part two of the book) and which invites other scholars to respond to his reassessment of Deleuze's place within Film Studies in relation to theorising on questions of national and transnational cinema, as well as the work on the formal developments of narrative in the context of various national cinemas contained within this book.

Part One establishes the theoretical framework through which the selected examples of multiple or fragmented narrative films will be analysed in subsequent chapters. Contained within this first section of the book is an explanation of how the movement- and time-image can be used to help us comprehend *how* narrative time constructs national identity. But these opening chapters are also much more than this. Martin-Jones skilfully constructs a methodology that combines Deleuzian notions of time and memory/de- and re-territorialisation with Bergson's dual memory types of habit/attentive recollection, applying them to Bhabha's model of the nation's (unstable) past as narrated in double-time. What is offered to the reader is an exceptionally lucid summary of Deleuze's thinking in *Cinema 1* and *2* to those unfamiliar with French philosopher's work, running alongside a highly original reassessment of how Deleuzian concepts of time and memory might be reapplied to questions of film narrative and national identity. Moreover, *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* demands that we look beyond the binary distinction often applied to Deleuze's cinema books in relation to Hollywood (as the principal manifestation of the movement image) and European art cinema as the privileged domain of the time-image. Instead, Martin-Jones proposes that at work in these recent 'mainstream' examples of fragmented narrative cinema is a more fluid relationship between the time- and movement-image, mainstream and art cinema: one which is characterised by a process of de- and re-territorialisation of the time- and movement-image taking place in the same film:

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In either case what we see in these non-linear films is a crisis of national identity formally rendered literal by multiple, jumbled or otherwise discontinuous narrative time. As such these images are time-images 'caught in the act' of becoming movement images. (37)

According to Martin-Jones, these 'hybrid' time-/movement-image films such as *Run Lola Run* (Tykwer, 1998), *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) and *Peppermint Candy* (Chang-dong Lee, 2000) display, through their characteristics of narrative form, 'a lesson' on how ideologies of national identity are continually re-territorialised (i.e. reasserting the illusion of the imagined community as sharing a collective history, memory and culture) while still maintaining the potential to 'enact a minor deterritorialisation of the time of the nation' (38). In this respect, such films throw into doubt the supposedly fixed binaries of art and commerce in cinema. They function as the Trojan horse within the 'mainstream' of a national cinema – smuggling potentially subversive political messages to the attentive viewer within their fragmented narrative form.

The case studies that make up the second part of *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* draw on a variety of cinemas from Europe (Britain and Germany), North America (Hollywood and the American independent) as well as East Asian cinemas (Hong Kong, South Korea and Japan). The inclusion of this final group is of particular significance given what many see as the problematic Eurocentric focus of Deleuze's work in the two *Cinema* books. The intention of this broad survey is, according to Martin-Jones, to 'examine these unusual hybrid films in their respective national context' (9). This is not to say though that the films are analysed in the hermetically sealed imagined community of the nation – cinema has, after all, been a transnational medium almost since its very inception. Martin-Jones thus encourages us to think of them in their global and local contexts, considering, for example, how the selected films from East Asian cinemas appropriate the time-image's modernist critique of modernity (where modernity is encountered 'largely as a colonial import from the West' (9)).

This sense of the global and the local also emerges in the chapter on *Sliding Doors* (Howitt, 1997) and *Run Lola Run*, where national capitals (London

and Berlin) are reconfigured (marketed even) as global cities located within a transnational network through which flow capital, culture and people. While both films employ precisely the type of multiple or fragmented narrative that the book claims is increasingly prevalent in contemporary world cinemas, this potentially subversive form of narration is exposed through Martin-Jones's analysis (borrowing from Bordwell [2002]) as little more than contemporary re-working of the narrative model employed in classical Hollywood narratives such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (Capra, 1946): whereby stark 'right' and 'wrong' choices of national identity are offered to the protagonists, leading the films to their conventional conclusions (both in terms of narrative resolution and ideological positioning). This exploration of narrative form is, once again, placed in its specific national context: *Run Lola Run* an example of German cinema attempting to resolve the contradictions and tensions of the nation state post-unification and *Sliding Doors* as a film that explores (albeit in a very selective and conservative way) the reconfiguring of national identity in Blairite Britain of the late 1990s.

Chapters four and five shift the focus from the European cityscape to American cinema, evaluating how Hollywood and American independent cinema have sought to narrate national identity in response to the First Gulf War and the geo-political reconfigurations that American has experienced at home and abroad in the wake of 9/11. In the former category, *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) is cited as an exemplar of the movement-image supporting an unquestioningly patriotic and triumphalist narrative, while *Memento* is presented as its dialectical opposite – offering a covert critique of US foreign policy and military intervention in the Persian Gulf that emerges through its fragmented narrative form. Here Martin-Jones deftly crafts a compelling reading of the film as 'deterritorialising the national narrative of triumphalism' (141). The argument for *Memento's* politically engaged subtext hinges on the fact that the material fortunes of Shelby (the film's central protagonist) are transformed by a murder he commits in a disused oil refinery, which Martin-Jones views as an allegory of US intervention in the oil rich Persian Gulf in the early 1990s for the purposes of obtaining considerable mineral wealth. However, in this particular

case such a subtle interpretation requires a leap of faith on the part of the spectator/reader, in so much as the oil refinery where the murder in *Memento* takes place was, as Martin-Jones himself acknowledges, apparently not the crew's first choice location, 'making it difficult to draw any deliberate significance from this setting' (149).

The following chapter on the construction in contemporary American cinema of a defensive US identity post 9/11 is constructed in a similar way – this time the sci-fi blockbuster *Terminator 3* (Mostow, 2003) allegorically codes through the movement image the trauma and loss of 9/11 as 'inevitable', suggesting to 'ordinary' Americans 'that "they" could not have saved those who died' (157). *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Gondry, 2004) is on this occasion the contemporaneous time-image 'caught in the act' of becoming a movement-image that, through its themes of revisiting the past as a means of reworking personal suffering or loss, suggests the US should examine its own role and actions in the events leading up to the national trauma of 9/11. Martin-Jones presents a carefully constructed argument for reading the intensely personal and seemingly apolitical narrative of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* as an allegory and veiled critique of collective amnesia surrounding the causes of 9/11 (which, in the opinion of this reader, is more convincing than that offered in the previous chapter for *Memento*).

There is no questioning the fact that Martin-Jones selects his case studies judiciously in these two chapters, and is more than capable of constructing an intellectually engaging and academically rigorous argument to illustrate the main thesis of his book. However a question mark remains over the films that do not appear in the chapters on American triumphalism and renegotiation of the national past post 9/11 – specifically, the treatment of the political and personal consequences of US military intervention in the Persian Gulf in the both the early 1990s and early 2000s provided by *The Jacket* (Maybury, 2005) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (Demme, 2004), and Spike Lee's *25<sup>th</sup> hour* (2002), where the director's commentary on the climate of post-9/11 America is negotiated through the cityspace of New York (and would therefore have dovetailed neatly with the analysis of global cities in chapter three).

The sense that emerges from the case studies in Part Two of *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* is that the 'reterritorialising pull' of the classical narrative structure is, in the majority of cases, simply too strong to permit a truly counter-cinematic application of narrative form in the selected films (i.e. one that functions on both a formal and ideological level). One way to explore the more subversive potential of these multiple or fragmented narrative films could have been to extend more explicitly the combination of Bhabha and Deleuzian theory proposed in chapter one. Reading Deleuze through Bhabha opens up the possibility of 'a performative rethinking of the past in the present that, to use a Deleuzian term, constantly reterritorialises national identity' (33); this is arguably the most radical way in which *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* attempts to move forward Deleuze's thinking in relation to debates around national cinema. In so doing, we are offered the possibility of recuperating the 'post-colonial' dimension within Deleuze's work, and countering those critics who see his writing as speaking exclusively from an elitist, Eurocentric position.

And yet, Martin-Jones's application of Bhabha in Part Two is largely notable by its absence. First, due to the fact that the theoretical approach combining Deleuze and Bhabha in chapter one is not explicitly referred to in any of the subsequent case study chapters. And secondly because, as Martin-Jones himself acknowledges (34-5), central to Bhabha's notion of 'narrating the nation' as expressed in his celebrated essay 'DissemiNation: time, narrative and the margins of the modern nation' (1990) is the experience of the post-colonial, diasporic or migrant subject. That the films selected for analysis here appear to overlook these 'peripheral' subjectivities in a discussion of the construction of national identity is perhaps symptomatic of a blind spot within the book as a whole. It would have been fascinating, for example, to see how Martin-Jones could have applied his combination of theoretical perspectives from Deleuze and Bhabha to films such as *Caché* (Haneke, 2005) or *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2005) where, within a fragmented narrative form, difference – represented by the experiences and histories of post-colonial or migrant protagonists – 'ungrounds' a fixed representation of national cultural identity. Moreover, and in relation to *The Three Burials*, the

absence of any reference to the Mexican screenwriter Guillermo Arriaga (and his, until recently, long-term collaborator director Alejandro González Iñárritu) in Martin-Jones's study is surprising. For in the context of world cinema (*Babel* [2006]), Mexican national cinema (*Amores perros* [2000]) as well as within the Hollywood studio system (*21 Grams* [2004]) and in more peripheral areas of the mainstream US film industry (*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* [2005]) Iñárritu and Arriaga have been arguably the most prominent practitioners of this 'new' style of fragmented narrative cinema that forms the primary focus of *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*.

The above comments are, of course, made with the knowledge that no study of this nature can incorporate *all* related filmic texts. What these proposed additions/alternatives hopefully illustrate, though, is how the debates initiated by *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* might be expanded and reassessed by those working in the field of Deleuze and Film Studies. It would, moreover, be interesting to see how the arguments put forward by Martin-Jones could be advanced in the specific contexts of other national cinemas, as well as in their relationship to recent theorising around transnational cinemas, diasporic or 'accented' cinema and what Laura Marks (2000) also drawing on Deleuze has termed 'intercultural' cinema.

Underpinning *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity* is a debate as to where and how Deleuze can fit into the broader remit of the academic discipline of Film Studies. For this, as well as Martin-Jones's talent for opening up a discussion of (often) convoluted theoretical concepts in a manner that is as lucid as it is accessible, the book will, one imagines, find a broad readership in both Film Studies and Deleuze Studies.

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