One enters a world of critical theory that stands anxious at an impasse between dutiful studies of national representation, and the impulses of post-national anti-essentialism. As I begin my tentative forays into media scholarship, particularly into questions of nation and national allegory, I find myself immobilized by two often incongruent intellectual forces which cripple any attempt to theorize nation in any stable form – a responsibility towards the studies of national/cultural representation and power politics in cinema, and a desire to move beyond the limiting confines of reading cinema within a national optic.

Cinema is now, and arguably always has been, a globalized medium. The globalizing process, traveling media, and the transnational nature of the cinematic medium virtually compel the cinema theorist to move beyond the limiting framework of the nation-state. Furthermore, with notions of the “post-national” circulating within academic circles since the mid-’90s, the compulsion to think of film beyond its capacity as a representative of a particular nation or culture becomes imminent. Yet, the battles fought within cultural studies over representations of race, nation, gender and so on, and the theorization of power, are hard to leave behind. When reading the work of Ulrich Beck for instance, who argues for a departure from “methodological nationalism” towards an embrace for a cosmopolitan identity, I am troubled by how such discourse would shape cinema studies. The promises of a post-national, cosmopolitan cinema present a seductive framework with which to approach film, but I am hesitant to let go of hard won postcolonial struggles over representation and identity in media studies. Yet, as I shall discuss, continuing to read all cinema, particularly that which is “accented,” not only limits the text to the suffocating responsibility of always “speaking nation,” but also prescribes it to a position of marginality and subjecthood. The question of whether we are ready to embrace the post-national, to leave representational studies of race and nation behind, is thus critical when considering the future directions of film theory. Even as struggles over representations of ethnicity and nation are being continually fought, post-national discourse has made the reading of national allegory not only problematic, but also dangerously limiting.

At its most fundamental, this paper is therefore a rumination on how the new postcolonial, post-“Third world” writer who is only just beginning to grapple with the complexities of contemporary discourse in politics and national identity, should position herself within a world of “posts.” In an intellectual climate which exhibits aversion to all manner of essentialised subject positions, in this case, the national, one wonders how a position of agency and political engagement might be set up. I take this question up with regard to the issue of representing nation in transnational cinema. My paper considers the ethical importance of continuing to read transnational cinema through nationalist frameworks, while also realizing the
limitations of doing so when considering newer transnational productions. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) serves as an example of a transnational production which incites these considerations. I begin with a look at the critiques leveled against *Slumdog*, many of which accuse the film of being “poverty porn,” an Orientalist exploitation of India. I acknowledge how reading the film as being representative of nation keeps the politics of representation alive—an important methodology of resistance when theorizing politics of privilege and disenfranchisement in global media. However, I argue that the burden of “speaking” from a place of nation and culture is also a very limiting approach to reading transnational productions. It not only restrains the assessment of cinema within the problematic boundaries of nationhood, but also forces all non-Hollywood cinema, particularly “accented cinema” to bear the burden of representing nation and culture. The second section of the paper thus addresses my objections to reading *Slumdog* from within a nationalist framework and the implications for the politics of nation in film and cultural theory if we continue to do so. I do not promise a theoretical solution to a dilemma of such mammoth proportions (such an ambition exceeds the confines of this essay), but I do hope to draw attention to the need for new directions in film theory which are better able to account for the challenges of increasingly transnational productions and global audiences. Even if transnational productions are inevitably studied in terms of national representation, this paper argues that this should be done with a greater critical awareness of its own limiting and problematic position.

**Cultural Studies and National Representation: Keeping the Politics of Resistance Alive**

It is appropriate to begin with a summary of some pertinent issues in the politics of representing nation. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994) provides a comprehensive outline of how the inter-connected issues of Eurocentrism, racism, and multi-culturalism led to the development of discourses of resistance and identity politics such as “postcoloniality” and “Third-Worldism.” The impulse to critique Eurocentric norms provoked among so-called colonized intellectuals a political atmosphere dominated by questions of self-representation and identity politics—questions of who gets to speak, where, how, and to represent whom. Gayatri Spivak’s challenging question, “Can the subaltern speak?” can be said to encapsulate these politics of representation and self-representation, which in the context of this essay, is activated via the question of who gets to speak on behalf of the less-empowered. The question of representations of nation is central to the postcolonial studies movement and with the ascent of postcolonial studies in the ‘80s, the importance placed on speaking for oneself via the literary (or cinematic) text has attained almost militant significance—an act of devout self-empowerment undertaken by the disenfranchised. According to the logic of postcolonial critique of the power hierarchies of representation, when a dominant culture seeks to represent the so-called “Third World,” it inevitably runs the risk of “appropriating” it.

The suspicion that was encouraged with regards to the issue of representation ritualized a politics of resistance within literary study, which later appeared in film theory. With the media’s potential for global reach, struggles over the right to represent nation in cinema have been high on the academic agenda. *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) serves as an example of a transnational production which incites these considerations. I now address the logic behind some of these attitudes towards the film and their ethical importance in keeping the struggle for the politics of representation alive.

Because of its nationally hybrid origins and its success among “western” audiences, *Slumdog Millionaire* has become the ideal battleground for issues of cultural and national representation. A film with distinct transnational production values, it is directed by British director, Danny Boyle, and co-directed by Indian director Loveleen Tandan. Its screenplay is written by British screenwriter Simon Beaufoy, based on a novel by Indian author Vikas Swarup. Produced by British production
companies Celador Films and Film4Productions, it is shot and set entirely in India with an ethnic Indian cast. A popular success, it won eight Academy Awards in 2009, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It also won seven British Academy Film Awards (including Best Film), five Critics’ Choice Awards, and four Golden Globes. The film’s narrative is structured around the gameshow format of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, with Jamal’s story being told through flashbacks on his childhood with his brother in the slums of Mumbai and his love for his childhood companion, Latika. Being the brainchild of a British director and screenplay writer, *Slumdog* has received much criticism, first for purportedly being a neo-colonialist misrepresentation of India and secondly, for masquerading as “globalized or world cinema.”

Beyond being sheer entertainment, *Slumdog*, with its nod to Hindu-Muslim violence, its observation of child prostitution, gang violence, and visual and thematic exploration of poverty, actually claims to engage with serious social issues. This lends it an aura of credibility which has problematic implications. The film, for instance, opens with a torture scene in which Jamal recalls his childhood in the slums. What follows is a lengthy montage of Jamal and his brother Salim running through the slums of Mumbai, the camera tracking them as they race past garbage, tin huts, open sewers and laboring women. In another scene, street urchins are deliberately blinded so that they might make more money from begging. Rather than allowing itself to be simply written off as pure entertainment or a run-of-the-mill love story, the film dangerously sells out to what is often perceived as the “authentic” Third World experience – poverty, squalor and repression. Roger Ebert’s review of the film for the *Chicago Sun Times* for instance, repeatedly compliments Boyle for providing Western audiences with a glimpse of “the real India” which, in Ebert’s view, is akin to an aestheticized tour of Third World poverty:

The film’s universal appeal will present the real India to millions of moviegoers for the first time. By the real India...I mean the real India of social levels that seem
to be separated by centuries...the India of Mother Teresa still exists....People living in the streets. A woman crawling from a cardboard box...Men relieving themselves by the roadside.\(^{10}\)

Gross imagery aside, Ebert’s overly ecstatic applause for the film as representing “the real India” is highly problematic. His comment serves as an example of what is at stake if the politics of representation which surround the film go un-critiqued.

Ebert entertains a view of India that gratuitously circumscribes to patronizing notions of the primitive, inferior, and exotic Other which Edward Said describes in his canonical book, *Orientalism*.\(^{11}\) That the slum has come to represent India in the Western popular imagination has a longstanding history. In “Slumdog Comprador”, Ajay Gehlawat describes how films such as Louis Malle’s *Phantom India* (1969) and *Calcutta* (1969), Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Roland Joffé’s *City of Joy* (1992), and Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman’s documentary *Born Into Brothels* (2004), are part of a larger corpus of cinematic texts which display the ongoing appeal of the slumscape. Thankfully, *Slumdog Millionaire’s* potential to represent this extremely Eurocentric view of India has not gone un-critiqued. Gehlawat comments:

Such films, – stemming back to Malle’s documentaries and including this year’s Oscar winner [*Slumdog Millionaire*] – provide what Shyamal Sengupta calls “a poverty tour” for Western audiences. Furthermore, in the case of *Slumdog*, this is a poverty-tour-as-music-video providing brief, rapidly edited bursts of shocking slum imagery to the pounding, pulsating beats of A.R. Rahman’s technofusion soundtrack.\(^{12}\)

Gehlawat takes issue with the aestheticized, yet nonetheless derogatory image of India that pervades the film. “It’s a white man’s imagined India,” writes Shyamal Sengupta in the *Los Angeles Times*,\(^{14}\) a neo-colonialist attempt to speak for a subaltern India\(^{15}\) and re-package it according to problematic, long-standing imperialist worldviews. Robert Koehler’s review for *Cineaste* exemplifies the general tone of dissatisfaction towards the film:

Boyle’s feverish, woozy, drunken, and thoroughly contrived picareque... conveniently packages misperceptions about India (and the East) that continue to support the dominant Western view of the Subcontinent, making the film a potent object to examine not only what is cockneyed about an outsider’s view (particularly, and Englishman’s view) of India, but even more, what is misperceived by a middle brow critical establishment and audience about what comprises world cinema.\(^{16}\)

One particular scene from *Slumdog* lends itself to this criticism. Jamal finds he can make a living as a tour guide and takes an American couple to the Ganges River, “the biggest laundromat in India.” The tourists lap up the scene of women washing colorful cloth in the muddy waters. The camera pulls back to a long distance establishing shot which embraces the vibrantly colorful image, aligning the audience’s gaze with that of the tourists. The spectator is encouraged to adopt a tourist’s gaze of India – one predicated on the exoticness of the image. When Jamal leads the tourists back to their car, they discover that it had been stripped clean of its tires, engine and other components. The furious driver beats and kicks Jamal, to the horror of the tourists. Jamal retorts, “You want to see a bit of real India? Here it is.” Boyle, of course, refers to the side of India so poverty stricken and chaotic that it lacks all human decency and respect. It becomes clear here that the film does indeed claim to represent a certain “authentic” image of India, aligned with the perception of it as a “Third World,” Othered nation to Eurocentric eyes.

What is at stake here, when such a claim is made, is the very question I noted earlier on the politics of representation – of who gets to represent whom, how, and the implications of the act of representing. *Slumdog* creates an image of India which conforms to Orientalist ideologies of an exotic, primitive Other. India is made a “pure” image through its silent aestheticization – it is
defined, but it cannot define itself. To interpret and rephrase another national narrative in terms of the language and metaphor of one’s own cultural position inevitably subdues and subjects the other into conformity with one’s cultural parameters. The subject then loses its autonomy to represent self, not with any outward forms of resistance, but through unquestioning relinquishment of the power of speech. When one powerful culture claims to speak for another, what in fact happens is a consumption of difference in ordinance with the homogenizing tendency to reprise the values and parameters of the culturally dominant Self. That Slumdog claims to speak for this marginalized segment of Mumbai’s population, while certainly well-meaning, risks inflicting a “Spivak-ian” state of silence upon those made to undergo the re-articulation process. It is thus critical in the ongoing project of postcolonial struggle to constantly bear in mind the politics of nation when assessing transnational productions such as Slumdog Millionaire. When a film as popular as Slumdog has the power to reach global audiences, its responsibilities towards the representation of other nations cannot be ignored.

Yet I am hesitant also to slip into a knee-jerk polemical response whereby the subaltern nation is necessarily placed at the mercy of being spoken for by “First World” bodies of authority. As much as I realize that struggles over representation still remain very real, I wonder also how continually choosing to critique such transnational productions as necessarily “speaking nation” handicaps any other reading which may offer greater opportunities for empowerment. The next section explores how the pervading impulse in film studies to read cinema within a national framework is not only limiting but also subversive to the very ethical objectives of postcolonial critique.17

**Must The Nation Speak?: Beyond National Representation and the Tricky Issue of Necessary Allegory**

Having addressed the significance of resistance politics in the issues of representation, I now come to the question of their continued relevance in an age where categorically rooted subject identities have been effectively deconstructed. My interest in this paper is not so much to test the viability of the nation state as an actually existing entity, but to ponder the implications of a possible demise of nationalist readings in film theory. I will look at how reading transnational productions as representations of nation are not only problematic in an age of rigorous intellectual deconstructionism, but also adverse to the very agenda behind non-Eurocentric politics of nation and representation. Before doing so however, it is necessary to go briefly into the emergence of the post-national impulse in criticism over the last decade, particularly in the intersection between theories of globalization and the transnational and then the post-national turn in cultural studies.

Since the mid-1980’s and particularly since the collapse of the communist bloc in 1990, globalization has acquired the status of Grand Theory, an all-encompassing mode for understanding economic, cultural, and political realities. Malini Johar Schueller in Locating Race provides a broad picture of this intellectual movement’s broader arguments:

The broad strokes of the argument are that although transnational trade and capitalist structures have long linked the world together, the increased mobility of the means of production, the emphasis on information technology, as well as the growth of multi-national corporations, have brought about a new era in which nation-states no longer control economies and are therefore weak as political agents.20 21

The nation increasingly occupies a problematic position in which its continued existence is brought into question. Mathew Horsman and Andrew Marshall in After the Nation State discuss how the global opening which marked the 1980s would deconstruct the illusionary cohesiveness of the nation-state and give way to tribalism amongst more fragmented societies.22 The emerging trend is of the deconstruction of the validity and continued existence of the nation state, if not in the lived world, then at least within academic thought.23

As the idea of the national becomes increasingly harder to define, the problematized position of “nationhood” also finds its way into
cultural and film theory. Schueller goes on to write, with regard to the implication of globalization as an intellectual movement for cultural studies and social theory:

Most theorists of globalization accept that globalization is a historical turning point that has displaced outdated models of center and periphery, of domination and subjection — in other words, the key terms of anticolonial and antiracist thinking that still remain central to questions of social justice.\(^{\text{24}}\)

She brings up the example of the launch of the journal *Public Culture* in 1988\(^{\text{25}}\) in which the editors resisted outmoded positions such as neocolonialism or third worldism.\(^{\text{26}}\) Arjun Appadurai further developed the notion of the dissolution and deterritorialization of the traditional nation-state in his classic essay, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.”\(^{\text{27}}\) Anthony Appiah later argues that the notion of cultural imperialism is itself “the outdated province of cultural preservationists” as it is upheld by “problematic and simplistic binaries of authenticity/purity versus the reality of cultural contamination.”\(^{\text{28}}\)

With nationalist readings of cinema gaining a disreputable status among recent intellectuals, one wonders how one should approach the issues of national representation in cinema — a topic which is nonetheless still a site of struggle, as I have demonstrated in the previous section. As Anne Holden Rønning and Lene Johannessen wonder, “As the world turns postnational, postcapitalist, transcultural and even post-human, what position is left for the postcolonial?”\(^{\text{29}}\) An answer to this might involve a denial of the very politics of resistance and national representation through which film has been read for the past decade or so. The rest of this section explores my objections to the limitations imposed by the perpetual reading of films as representations of nation.

To do so, I would first like to draw upon the criticism surrounding the debate concerning Frederic Jameson’s national allegory and its continued viability. Admittedly, *Slumdog Millionaire* is less an allegory of India as it is a more overt engagement with it, but I would still wish to apply the objections raised with regards to Jameson to the case of nationalist readings of *Slumdog*. At the centre of both lies the problematic impulse to read “Third World” texts within the confines of nation and culture.

Used definitively in Fredric Jameson’s “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” “national allegory” describes a “Third World” text whose “story of the private, individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.”\(^{\text{30}}\) In this canonical essay, Jameson sets up the argument that “all third-world texts...necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory.”\(^{\text{31}}\) However, Aijaz Ahmad’s equally definitive response in “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” critiques Jameson’s limiting prescription for its condemnation of all “third world” texts to a position of absolute Otherness. I am inclined to agree with Ahmad’s position that such an over-bearing prescription upon “Third World” texts perpetually locates it in binary opposition to the first world, therefore having always to occupy a place of marginality and being always forced to speak from a limiting, not to mention homogenized, position of nation and culture. Ahmad writes:

“Third Worlds Theory, the over-valorization of the nationalist ideology, and the assertion that “national allegory” is the primary, even exclusive, form of narrativity in the so-called third world. If this “third world” is constituted by the singular “experience of colonialism and imperialism” and if the only possible response is a nationalist one, then what else is there that is more urgent to narrate than this “experience”; in fact, there is nothing else to narrate.”\(^{\text{32}}\)

What I would like to draw upon here is the underlying resistance towards the notion of reading the Third World text as always representative of the nation. Such an approach constrains the text within its history of subjection, forcing it to exist only inasmuch as it is defined by this imperial experience. This is of course a homogenizing and brutally handicapping prescription which traps the colonized within a cycle of subordination.
I wish to extend and apply Ahmad’s critique of Jameson’s national allegory towards nationalist readings of transnational cinema. Granted, *Slumdog*, with a British director, screenplay writer and production house, does not fall clearly within the boundaries of “Third World cinema,” nor does it quite qualify as “Third World” allegory. Nevertheless, a large aspect of Ahmad’s argument still remains relevant when considering how the film has been criticized for being a misrepresentation of India. The approach to *Slumdog* taken by critics such as Koehler and Gehlawat are predicated upon Jameson’s claim that all films dealing with the Third World should be considered in terms of their representation of nation. As a transnational production, to critique *Slumdog* as a “First World” claim to represent an authentic “Third World” India, though perhaps apt, need not always be an automatic response. What underlies the impulse to do so therefore is a subscription to a similar Jameson-ian truism – that all “accented” films, or films which explore beyond a Eurocentric or Anglo-centric norm, necessarily bear the burden of representing nation. I am not suggesting that *Slumdog* does not deserve such critique – the first section of this paper describes how such a reading of the film is entirely called for – but I am also resisting what appears to be a knee-jerk response whenever a “First World” film attempts to feature a once-colonized nation and culture.

To always assess every transnational production according to its claims of authenticity or how “realistic” its depictions of a particular nation and culture are limits all encounters with the non-Anglocentric world to that of a hyper-nationalized, overly determined cultural experience. In all transnational encounters between the “First World” and “Third”, it appears that the “Third” must always bear the burden of “authentic” representation. Always crippled by a history of colonialism and marginality, the India of *Slumdog Millionaire*, according to the logic of such an approach, is one that constantly needs to be rescued by critics from the irreparable dangers of being “spoken for” by the dominant, imperial nation. This reading is oppressive toward the colonized subject as it forces all encounters with it to be necessarily framed within questions of representation, misrepresentation and self-representation.

Simply because it is set in Mumbai and features ethnic Indian characters, *Slumdog*, for instance, is necessarily seen as an act of cultural and national re-appropriation, even though the film clearly sets itself up to be a feel-good love story rather than a serious dramatic interpretation of Indian society, culture and politics. In a panel discussion held on *Slumdog Millionaire* at the National University of Singapore, Dr Tania Roy⁶³ suggests how the film need not be assessed according to how “authentic” its depiction of India is, but may be regarded as Boyle’s personal sentiment towards the country – a point of view which could perhaps be welcomed amid a climate of greater transnational discourse. What is needed is a departure from an inherently hierarchical structure of film criticism whereby the “Third World” must always respond from a colonized position, always forced to fight over nationalist issues of representations.

**Debilitating Ruminations on the Necessity of Reading Nation**

I have thus far described why being compelled to read the responsibilities of nationalist representation into transnational productions such as *Slumdog* can be problematic. So the question remains: what if theory could move past the limiting study of national representation when transnational productions such as *Slumdog* are considered? One could imagine a world of theory in which the once-colonized would be able to write as freely as those who never had to bear the anxieties of colonization – and the ensuing burden of policing representations. To some extent, recent discourse on the decline of the nation state offered a brief window for one to imagine a critical landscape where such freedoms were possible.

And yet in the midst of the postnationalism, globalization and all permutations of cultural relativism, the particularities of regions and their histories and struggles, still remain.¹⁴ As tempting as it seems, trying to work beyond studies of representation seems out of reach, for as long as historical power inequalities exist, the contestation over the right to represent nation will remain relevant. It may be the case as I have argued, that moving beyond the limiting and oppressive confines of reading the responsibilities of nation and
representation might offer some respite from the crippling responsibilities of representing nation. At the very least it presents an alternative discourse which frees the “non-West” from the burden of necessarily speaking from a position of cultural authenticity. To recognize this limitation would also acknowledge the now problematic place of nation within social theory. But it still seems that departing from studies of national representation at this point is not only naïve but also leaves the question of who has the right to represent dangerously unproblematized. At least until the playing field of multiple national medias are made equal, or when cinema becomes truly transnational (a utopic and unlikely situation), it is difficult for *Slumdog Millionaire* to be read beyond the politics of representing nation. One hopes however, that such a reading can be done with a greater, self-critical awareness regarding the problems of such an approach and its ultimate limitations.

Nadine Chan is a graduate student in the department of Critical Studies at the University of Southern California. Her research interests include transnational cinema, film theory, and cosmopolitan studies. She is interested in the future directions of film theory and in constructing a new framework through which cosmopolitan ethics might be assessed in media. Prior to beginning her Ph.D. at USC, she received her M.A. and B.A. at the National University of Singapore.

End Notes

3 In *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy defines accented cinema as constituted by exilic, diasporic, and ethnic films. It is a “cinema of displacement…for it is necessarily made by (and often for) specific displaced subjects and diasporic communities…a political cinema that stands opposed to authoritarianism and oppression” (30). Borrowing the spirit of Naficy’s term, I use “accented” here in a slightly looser manner, to signify a film which exhibits an alternative to the dominant culture and occupies a position of national and cultural marginality and difference. Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
5 “In sum, Eurocentrism sanitizes Western history while patronizing and even demonizing the non-West; it thinks of itself in terms of its noblest achievements – science, progress, humanism – but of the non-West in terms of its deficiencies, real or imagined.” (Shohat and Stam, 3)
9 I clearly distinguish here the difference between a transnational production and a transnational text. The former operates purely on the level of being a multi-national production, as in the case of *Slumdog Millionaire*. A transnational text on the other hand, as I have explored elsewhere, is one which bears a responsibility towards the ethics of discursive cosmopolitanism.
12 Shohat and Stam, 3.
13 Ajay Gehlawat, “*Slumdog Comprador: Coming to Terms with the Slumdog Phenomenon,*” *CineAction* 78 (2009), 4.

Though it may once have occupied such a position within Eurocentric discourse, India can no longer be accurately considered silent nor subaltern particularly with its own hugely successful domestic film industry.

Robert Koehler, “Slumdog Millionaire,” Cineaste 34.2 (Spring 2009), 75.

It is important at this point to more distinctly locate the scope of postcolonial discussion to which I refer to here. I do not at all mean to imply that the postcolonial and the postnational are opposed, on the contrary, postcolonial approaches tend to be critical of nationalist readings. However, even while dedicating its efforts toward the critique of essentialism and fixed meaning, postcolonial thought seems to have difficulty escaping the dialectic of the colonizer and the colonized – a bifurcating classification of “either-or” fixed identities that force us into increasingly claustrophobic positions, especially in the face of transnational mobility and exchange.


I am here positing the broader argument put forth by globalization theory. Significant disagreements to this position will be dealt with further on in the essay.


Schueller, 6.

“Editors Comments,” Public Culture 1 (Fall 1988), 1.

Schueller, 6.


Quoted in Schueller, 7.


Ibid.


Rønning and Johannessen, viii.

By this I mean that if cinema reaches a stage whereby transnational production involves the democratic participation of multiple nations; a utopic collaboration between equally influential creative bodies.