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LONGING AND BELONGING

1990s SOUTH ASIAN FILM AND VIDEO

BY ZOOL SULEMAN
The 1990s are the new “decade of the moment.” Driven in part by the nostalgia of the baby boomer generation as they relive old memories, this cultural throwback has sparked conversations across which are also “new” once more — some of which include the various circuits of knowledge formation.

Identity politics, race, belonging, migration, empire, colonialism, class, religion, LGBTQ姚 identities, Indigenous rights, and more are the topics that increasingly dominate conversations in the academy, the street, the home, and the universes of media and social media. In his influential essay, “Culture, Identity and Cinematic Representation” [1], cultural theorist Stuart Hall reconfigures the term “the colonial experience” of the historical, and the “traumatic” character of this “colonial experience.” He writes:

“Cultural identity… is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like every place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.”

Hall’s comments provide one possible lens through which to view the films within the Longing and Belonging program.

While the exercise of marking decades is false in some instances, since histories do not break into such easy categories, the 1990s were a time of significant cultural production within Canada’s South Asian communities. Influenced by the 1980s Black Arts Movement in Britain, and in opposition to state-sponsored multiculturalism in Canada, South Asian became a generative identifier for a variety of communities united by more than a geography of South Asia. No contemporary art production history of these communities from that time period can ring true without referencing Desh Pardesh, a multi-disciplinary arts festival that emerged in Toronto and op” (pg 77)ated in 1992 [2].

The Longing and Belonging program consists of three screenings, loosely structured around themes of diaspora, desire, and identity. DesiR’s Shorts Program includes two films, Ian Rashid’s Surviving Sabu (1998) and Leslie Sur-pris’ The Dreams of the Night Cleaners (1995). Desir’s Shorts Program includes Shani Mootoo’s Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas (1997) which completes the program. These six films cannot possibly represent the large body of South Asian film and video work produced during the 1990s — to do so would take a festival unto itself. What these six films try to do is provide a small sense of the rich, multivalent intersections that were explored in that era, as well as after, in film and video.

Diaspora is much more than geography and migration, and some of the films in the DesiR’s Shorts Program rely on family histories and archives. In Surviving Sabu, Rashid explores the story of Sabu, an Indian film actor who entered in orientalist films such as The Thief of Bagdood (1940) and Elephant Boy (1937), as a point of contention between a father and son in Canada. Is Sabu a representative of Hollywood success, or a tragic icon of cultural colonialism? In the end, as far as the filmmaker and Thomas the “subject” in Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas (1997) is concerned, the archive proves to be a rich and revelatory experience.

Two of the winners of 2019’s Governor General’s Awards in Visual and Media Arts were artists Ali Kazimi and Jeffrey Thomas, but twenty-two years ago Kazimi was the filmmaker and Thomas the “subject” in Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas. Of course, when two media artists are involved in a dialogue about Edward Curtis, photography, and Indigenous rights and land, the notion of a “subject” becomes much nuanced and complex. A groundbreaking film.

Although much remains unresolved in the Longing and Belonging program, diving into the archive proves to be a rich and revelatory experience. The “archive” is part of a multiplatform exploration of what happened in the 1990s. This year’s Longing and Belonging: 1990’s South Asian Film and Video program is an Indo-Caribbean journey by Michelle Mohabeer that reconfigures the story of a missing family member, and a look at the labour of racialized immigrant women. Befit, Alberta serves as the backdrop to this production, co-produced with the Banff Centre for the Arts and the National Film Board of Canada.

Surviving Sabu is a film that debuted at Desh Pardesh in 1991. Rashid and Saxena document conversations with South Asian artists in response to the AIDS crisis. Mostos explores butch/femme signifiers in The Wild Woman in the Woods and encounters a goddess in the forest. Cose- na/Caret & Cutlass is an Indo-Caribbean journey by Michelle Mohabeer that broadens notions of the South Asian diaspora and traces oral histories.

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Desire is a film that offers a small sense of the rich, multivalent intersections that were explored in that era, as well as after, in film and video.
Everything Must Fall presents an unflinching look at the #FeesMustFall student movement that stormed onto the South African political landscape in 2015 as a protest over the cost of education.

The story is told by four student leaders at Wits University, a public institution in Johannesburg, as well as their Vice Chancellor, Adam Habib, a former anti-apartheid student activist. When Habib’s efforts to contain the protest fail, he abandons his progressive principles and brings 1000 police to campus. Amin, the son, is made to confront the weight of leadership, along with inspiring moments of solidarity.

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Everything Must Fall shows the challenges, as well as the rewards, of building a decolonized movement aimed at fighting economic inequality. Intersectional in its approach, the film inspires with its story of how students, workers, and citizens worked together to fight back against institutional racism, patriarchy, and homophobia in South Africa.

Using intricate storytelling as well as humour, magic, and history, the mythologies influencing our cultures at both societal and individual levels are swept away. Everything Must Fall is a strong call to action for student and social movements the world over.

**Diaspora: Shorts Program**

**Surviving Sabu**

Saubi, the iconic Indian film star of 1930s and 1940s British cinema (including films The Jungle Book and The Thief of Bagdad), is the thread in the troubled relationship between a father and son in a Muslim family. Amin, the son, is making a film about Sabu, whose acting roles dried up once he reached adulthood. While Amin and his father Sandru once bonded over Sabu’s movies, they have now become the battleground for settling other, more personal arguments about sexuality and family obligations.

**The Dreams of the Night Cleaners**

Leila Sujii, Canada, 1995, 47 mins

Drama, archival footage, and animation are woven together in a fable format that explores the mythologies influencing our cultures at both societal and individual levels. Using intricate storytelling as well as humour, magic, and history, the conceptions haunting the subjects’ lives are swept away.

**The Thief of Baghdad**

Zarif Anvari, Iran, 2017, 12 mins

A captivating look at the dangerous and high-stakes game of Indian Relay.

**Indian Rights for Indian Women**

Alexandra Lazarowich, Canada, 2018, 6 mins

The story of three fierce Indigenous women who start a grassroots battle to regain their treaty status and rights.

**Enhior’hén:ne**

Roxann Whitebean, Mohawk Territory, 2018, 5 mins

Twins Tapwewin and Pawaken take part in a sacred Cree coming-of-age ceremony.

**Wild Things: The Power of Nature in Our Lives**

Isabelle Groc, Mike McKinlay, Canada, 2017, 76 mins

Toad People serves as a powerful call to action and a hopef ul reminder that people of all ages can come together to make a difference.

*Toad People* is presented with the Museum of Vancouver in conjunction with the exhibit Wild Things: The Power of Nature in Our Lives.
A South Asian woman adopts butterfly signifiers from white liberal culture as an antidote to her invisibility but, as a femme at heart, she doesn’t really know how to do things butches are apparently supposed to do. Her search for courage takes her into the mountains where she encounters her idol, a feisty goddess who has no time for timidity, roles, or rules.

Bolo! Bolo!
Ian Rashid and Kaspar Saxena, Canada, 1991, 30 mins
An exploration of the response of despotic South Asian communities to the AIDS crisis told through interviews, an examination of facts, and a weaving of images. At the core of the film are the testimonials of artists and activists—gay, lesbian, and straight—to the barriers and successes of organizing around the AIDS crisis.

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass
Michelle Mahabir, Canada, 1994, 30 mins
A poetic rumination on exile, displacement, and nationhood from the perspective of an Indo-Caribbean lesbian who migrated to Canada 20 years ago. Coconut Cane & Cutlass layers front-screen projection, re-created archival images, and narratives/histories, and dramatic scenes.

Desire: Shorts Program
The Wild Woman in the Woods
Shan Mbuto, Canada, 1995, 14 mins
In his debut feature, director Ian Soroka creates an evocative portrait of the southern Slovenian landscape that facilitated what is considered to be Europe’s most effective resistance movement during World War II. Part experimental ethnography, part metaphorical reflection, the film uses lush cinematography and a rich soundscape to contemplate life in the forest during wartime.

Greetings From Free Forests
Ian Soroka, US/Slovenia/Croatia, 2018, 99 mins
In his debut feature, director Ian Soroka artfully weaves archival footage from this collection with contemporary scenes and commentary from survivors, historians, and naturalists to trace the footpaths and ruins that remain as monuments to the resistance. “The Slovenian forest is at risk of erosion (partially due to logging, which is also covered in the film by way of old newsreel material), and the same can be said for memory. Greetings From Free Forests is a remarkable attempt to fight this process of oblivion.”

Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas
Ali Kazimi, Canada, 1997, 56 mins
A journey full of quiet insights and surprising twists, Shooting Indians begins with Ali Kazimi, a newly arrived student in Canada, unraveling the hidden history of the land he has chosen as his new home.

Propaganda: The Art of Selling Lies
Larry Weinstein, Canada, 2019, 92 mins
Propaganda, whether in film, print, posters, or architecture, is an act of persuasion that succeeds by bypassing critical thinking and unconsciously tugging at emotions. Spanning diverse sources, including the Catholic Church, mythical caves, totalitarian regimes, and the glossy allure of capitalism, propaganda has been harnessed as a powerful weapon to shape worldviews through compelling images and narratives. Propaganda: The Art of Selling Lies explores a diverse range of mediums from well-recognized symbols of fascist movements, to more subtle forms in political satire and online slander. It uncovers the means and techniques of persuasion employed by both powerful figures and those working to undermine the status quo. In a mediascape increasingly threatened by fake news and alternative facts, one question lingers: how do we know what we know?”

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THURSDAY MAY 9
8:00 PM CINEMATHEQUE
THURSDAY MAY 9
8:30 PM VAN CITY
THURSDAY MAY 9
12:00 PM SFU