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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 reignited conversations which are also “new” once more — some of which include the very circuits of knowledge formation.

Identity politics, race, belonging, migration, empire, colonialism, class, religion, LGBTQ2++ 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, “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation” [1], cultural theorist Stuart Hall references Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Jacques Derrida, Homi Bhabha, Kobena Mercer, and others as he explores what constitutes cultural identity. He posits a complex, layered definition that recognizes the “ruptures” and “discontinuities” of the historical, and the “traumatic” character of “the 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 everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, 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 *ab initio*, since histories do not break into such easy demarcations, the 1990s were a time of significant cultural production within Canada's South Asian arts communities. Influenced by the 1980s Black Arts Movement in Britain, and in opposition to state-sponsored multiculturalism paradigms in Canada, South Asian became a generous identifier for a variety of communities united by more than the 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 operated from 1988–2001 [2]. Desh Pardesh was the “scene” that influenced the foundation of *Rungh* and where the first issue of *Rungh* magazine was launched in 1992 [3].

The *Longing and Belonging* program consists of three screenings, loosely structured around themes of diaspora, desire, and identity. *Diaspora: Shorts Program* includes two films, Ian Rashid's *Surviving Sabu* (1998) and Leila Sujir's *The Dreams of the Night Cleaners* (1995). *Desire: Shorts Program* includes Shani Mootoo's *The Wild Woman in the Woods* (1993), Ian Rashid and Kaspar Saxena's *Bolo! Bolo!* (1991), and Michelle Mohabeer's *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* (1994), and Ali Kazimi's feature film *Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas* (1997) 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
”

Diaspora is much more than geography and migration, and both of the films in the *Diaspora* program rely on family histories and archives. In *Surviving Sabu*, Rashid explores the story of Sabu, an Indian film actor who featured in orientalist films such as *The Thief of Baghdad* (1940) and *Elephant Boy* (1937), as a point of contestation between a father and a son in Canada. Is Sabu a representative of Hollywood success, or a tragic icon of cultural colonialism? In the end, as father and son watch Sabu on the screen, the father wryly says: “Relax. It is

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[1] Originally published as “Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation” in *Framework, The Journal of Cinema and Media* (1989) (Volume 36) (Special Issue on conference papers presented at the Theory and Politics on Location Symposium).
[2] The South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), a non-profit, artist-run centre, has compiled an archive of Desh Pardesh, which can be found here: <https://www.savac.net/collection/desh-pardesh>
[3] The first issue of *Rungh* magazine, focusing on the “proceedings” of Desh Pardesh in 1991 and other newly commissioned works (Volume 1, No. 1 and 2) (1992), can be found at the Simon Fraser Digitized Collections here: <https://digital.lib.sfu.ca/rungh-collection/rungh-south-asian-quarterly-culture-comment-and-criticism>

only a film. What harm can a film do?” In *The Dreams of the Night Cleaners*, Sujir traverses a different cultural terrain, weaving together drama, a fable, the story of a missing family member, and a look at the labour of racialized immigrant women. Banff, Alberta serves as the backdrop to this production, co-produced with the Banff Centre for the Arts and the National Film Board of Canada.

Desire is only a part of the thread stringing together the three films in the program that carries its name. In *Bolo! Bolo!*, which debuted at Desh Pardesh in 1991, Rashid and Saxena document conversations with South Asian activists in response to the AIDS crisis. Mootoo explores butch/femme signifiers in *The Wild Woman in the Woods* and encounters a goddess in the forest. *Coconut/Cane & Cutlass* is an Indo-Caribbean journey by Michelle Mohabeer that broadens notions of the South Asian diaspora and traces oral histories.

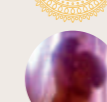
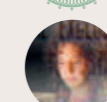
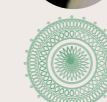
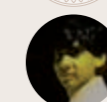
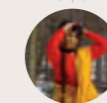
Two of the winners of 2019's Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts were artists Ali Kazimi and Jeffrey Thomas, but twenty-two years ago Kazimi was the filmmaker and Thomas the “subject” in *Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas*. Of course, when two media artists are involved in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

Although much remains unexplored in the *Longing and Belonging* program, diving into the archive proves to be a rich and revelatory experience. This “activation” of the archive is a part of the journey for *Rungh* and DOXA as we continue to explore, in the present, the lasting themes of 1990s South Asian film and video.



Zool Suleman is a writer and editor. He is the current Editor of *Rungh* magazine and the Executive Director of the *Rungh* Cultural Society.

This year's *Longing and Belonging: 1990's South Asian Film and Video* programming arises out of a unique partnership between DOXA and *Rungh*. This partnership encompasses not only the program that is being presented at DOXA, but also an ongoing set of conversations which will take place in other venues and in the future, as well as in the publication of a special issue of *Rungh* magazine later this year. It is part of a multiplatform exploration of what happened in the 1990s.



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FILMS IN LONGING AND BELONGING INCLUDE:

Diaspora: Shorts Program
THU MAY 9 | 6:00 PM | CINEMATHEQUE
(pg 76)

Surviving Sabu
Ian Rashid, Canada, 1998, 16 mins

The Dreams of the Night Cleaners
Leila Sujir, 1995, 47 mins

Desire: Shorts Program
THU MAY 9 | 8:00 PM | CINEMATHEQUE
(pg 78)

The Wild Woman in the Woods
Shani Mootoo, Canada, 1993, 14 mins

Bolo! Bolo!
Ian Rashid and Kaspar Saxena, Canada, 1991, 30 mins

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass
Michelle Mohabeer, Canada, 1994, 30 mins

Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas
Ali Kazimi, Canada, 1997, 56 mins
FRI MAY 10 | 6:00 PM | CINEMATHEQUE
(pg 79)

THURSDAY MAY 9

6:00 PM SFU



CANADIAN PREMIERE

JUSTICE FORUM

Everything Must Fall

Rehad Desai, South Africa, 2018, 85 mins

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. Predictably, there are dire consequences for the young leaders.

The drama unfolds chronologically, revealing the activists' internal struggles with the weight of leadership, along with inspiring moments of solidarity. When the university management starts outsourcing janitorial services to a private company (who then cut salaries in half), workers join forces with the student movement.

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. The lessons learned from the #FeesMustFall act as a strong call to action for student and social movements the world over. -SC

THIS SCREENING IS PART OF JUSTICE FORUM AND WILL INCLUDE A POST-FILM DISCUSSION. READ MORE ON PAGE 18.

AUDIENCE PARTNER



THURSDAY MAY 9

6:00 PM CINEMATHEQUE



1990s SOUTH ASIAN

GUESTS

Diaspora: Shorts Program

Surviving Sabu

Ian Rashid, Canada, 1998, 16 mins

Sabu, the iconic Indian film star of 1930s and 1940s British cinema (including films *The Jungle Book* and *The Thief of Baghdad*), is the flashpoint 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 Sujir, 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 misconceptions haunting the subjects' lives are swept away. -KO

THIS FILM IS PART OF LONGING AND BELONGING: 1990S SOUTH ASIAN FILM AND VIDEO. MORE ON PAGE 21.



PRESENTED BY

THURSDAY MAY 9

6:30 PM VANCITY



Scenes from Turtle Island: Shorts Program

Fast Horse

Alexandra Lazarowich, Canada, 2018, 14 mins

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

Mommy Goes Race

Charlene McConini, Canada, 2018, 6 mins

A portrait of the only female car racer in Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg Nation.

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.

Ka Ussi-Tshishkutamashuht

Béatrice Mark, Rachel Mark, Gisèle Mark, Canada, 2018, 5 mins

A group of women from the Innu nation of Unamen Shipu attempt to train new choir singers in this heartwarming and humorous short.

OshKiKiShiKaw: A New Day

Jules Koostachin, Canada, 2019, 25 mins

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

Enhiór'hén:ne [Tomorrow]

Roxann Whitebean, Mohawk Territory, 2018, 5 mins

A group of Mohawk children's predictions about the state of Mother Earth 200 years into the future.

THURSDAY MAY 9

7:00 PM MOV



Toad People

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

Every summer, thousands of fingernail-sized Western toads cover a rural road in the community of Ryder Lake in Chilliwack, British Columbia. When the toadlets migrate from their breeding ground in the wetlands into the forest, many never make it to the other side of the road. Western toads, like other amphibians in BC, are struggling because of habitat loss, climate change, and human interference. For local residents like Steve Clegg, who grew up catching tadpoles in nearby ponds, the rapid population decline is a cause for concern. Directors Isabelle Groc and Mike McKinlay introduce us to the stories of people like Clegg who make up the community-led movement to save this endangered species. Through stunning cinematography that takes us from the wetlands to the forest, and to various communities across BC, *Toad People* serves as a powerful call to action and a hopeful reminder that people of all ages can come together to make a difference. -MS

Toad People is presented with the Museum of Vancouver in conjunction with the exhibit *Wild Things: The Power of Nature in Our Lives*.



SCREENING PARTNER



THURSDAY MAY 9

8:00 PM CINEMATHEQUE



COCONUT/CANE & CUTLASS

1990s SOUTH ASIAN

GUESTS

Desire: Shorts Program

The Wild Woman in the Woods

Shani Mootoo, Canada, 1993, 14 mins

A South Asian woman adopts butch signifiers from white lesbian culture as an antidote to her invisibility but, as a femme at heart, she doesn't really know how to do the 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 diasporic 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 Mohabeer, 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, oral narratives/histories, and dramatic scenes. -KO

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THURSDAY MAY 9

8:30 PM VANCITY



CANADIAN PREMIERE

POLITICS OF PLACE

Greetings From Free Forests

Ian Soroka, US/Slovenia/Croatia, 2018, 99 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.

The German and Italian occupation of Slovenia forced thousands to flee their homes. A Communist-led resistance movement known as the Liberation Front formed when Slovenian Partisans sought refuge deep in the forests of Yugoslavia. They constructed their stronghold under the cover of spruce trees where the movement's leadership operated, hidden from fascist occupiers and collaborators, for almost two years.

After the war, Communist authorities built another secret bunker deep beneath the forest floor. Originally intended to shelter party leadership in the case of atomic fallout, this climate-controlled facility now houses the film archives of the Cinematheque of the Republic of Slovenia. 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. -CL

"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." -CINEUROPA

BEST INTERNATIONAL FILM AWARD
2018 DOCLISBOA FESTIVAL

THURSDAY MAY 9
FRIDAY MAY 10

8:30 PM SFU
12:00 PM VANCITY



RATED Y FOR YOUTH

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 glitzy 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? -JY

THE FRIDAY, MAY 10 SCREENING IS PART OF RATED Y FOR YOUTH AND WILL INCLUDE A POST-FILM DISCUSSION. READ MORE ON PAGE 19.

FRIDAY MAY 10

6:00 PM CINEMATHEQUE



1990s SOUTH ASIAN

GUESTS

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.

Kazimi takes interest in the career of his friend and colleague, Iroquois photographer Jeffrey Thomas. Through the work of early American photographer Edward Curtis, Thomas became inspired to examine how Indigenous peoples have been photographed. Woven throughout the film is Kazimi's exploration of the irony of an Indian from India making a film about a North American Indian. -KO

Ali Kazimi and Jeffrey Thomas are both recipients of the 2019 Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts.

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