The 1990s are the new “decade of the moment.” Driven in part by the nostalgia of marking decades 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, LGBTQ++, 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,” Shani Mootoo’s 1989 essay was the foundation 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, and are like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being frozen in some essentialised past, they are subject to the constant play of history, culture and power. Far from being produced in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and whose, 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 and 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], Dasheen 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. Dasheen: Shorts Program includes two films, Ian Rashid’s Surviving Sabu (1998) and Lael Salisbury’s The Dream of the Night Cleaner (1995). Desheen: Shorts Program includes Shani Mootoo’s The Wild Woman in the Woods (1993). Ian Rashid and Kasim Kazi’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 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 Dasheen: Shorts program are lyrical and rely on family history 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 Bagdad (1940) and El Confidencial (1947), as a point of contention between a father and son in Canada. Is Sabu a representative of Hollywood success, or a tragic icon of colonialism? In the end, the father and son watch Sabu on the screen, the father wryly says: “Relax. It is only a film. What harm can a film do?” In The Dream of the Night Cleaner, Sujaire 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. Bolo! 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 Dasheen Pardesh in 1991, Rashid and Salwa document conversations with South Asian artists in response to the AIDS crisis. Most of its explorations butch/femme signifiers in The Wild Woman in the Woods and encounters a goddess in the forest. Cosas/Coconuts is an India-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 feature film.

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


[2] The South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), a non-profit, artist-run centre, has compiled an archive of Dasheen Pardesh, which can be found here: https://www.savac.be/selection/dasheen

Everything Must Fall
Belief Drive, 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 implores 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.

**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.

**Surviving Sabu**
Ian Rafati, Canada, 1959, 16 mins

Sabu, the iconic Indian film star of 1930s and 1940s British cinema (including films The Jungle Book and The Thief of Bagdad), 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.

**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.

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

**Everything Must Fall**
Rehab Mostafavi, South Africa, 2018, 85 mins

Diaspora: Shorts Program

**Scenes from Turtle Island: Shorts Program**

**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.

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

The Wild Woman in the Woods

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

A poetic rumination on exile, displacement, and nationhood from the perspective of a South Asian diaspora community. Ian Rashid and Kaspar Saxena’s 1991 short documents the experience of this community through the testimonies of artists and activists. The film is a critical reflection on the AIDS crisis told through interviews, an examination of facts, and a weaving of images. An exploration of the response of diasporic South Asian communities to the AIDS epidemic, Bolo! Bolo! has no time for timidity, roles, or rules. The filmmakers invite us to do the things butches are apparently supposed to do. Her search for courage is an antidote to her invisibility but, as a femme at heart, she doesn’t really know how to do it. This film is part of Longing and Belonging: 1990s South Asian Film and Video. More on page 21.

Coconut/Cane & Cutlass

Michelle Mohabeer, Canada, 1994, 30 mins

A poetic rumination on exile, displacement, and nationhood from the perspective of an Indo-Caribbean woman who migrated to Canada 20 years ago. Coconut/Cane & Cutlass layers front-screen projection, re-created archival images, and narratives/fantasies and dramatic scenes. This film is part of Longing and Belonging: 1990s South Asian Film and Video. More on page 21.

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 ethno-photography, 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.

“[The Slovenian forest] is at risk of erosion (partly due to logging, which is also covered in the film by way of old newswax material), and the same can be said for memory. Greetings From Free Forests is a remarkable attempt to fight this process of oblivion.” — CINEMATHEQUE

This film is part of Longing and Belonging: 1990s South Asian Film and Video. More on page 21.

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 aerial 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? This film is part of Longing and Belonging: 1990s South Asian Film and Video. More on page 21.

Shooting Indians: A Journey with Jeffrey Thomas

Ali Kazimi and Jeffrey Thomas are both recipients of the 2019 Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts. Ali Kazimi takes interest in the career of his friend and colleague, Innuqatik 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. This film is part of Longing and Belonging: 1990s South Asian Film and Video. More on page 21.