

Liverpool Film Seminar

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Every year, Liverpool Film Seminar invites six experts to deliver a series of talks. Topics vary greatly and the series does not focus on a specific aspect of film. Instead, a range of genres and approaches are celebrated, from historical reach to the internet's impact on cinematic material.

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Seeing Themselves Through Western Eyes? Diasporic Filmmakers as Purveyors of the Exotic

Contemporary western society appears to enjoy an insatiable appetite for 'the exotic', be it in the shape of ethnic fusion food, world music, Asian cool, yoga, thai chi and Ayurvedic retreats, global adventure travel, ethno chic, world cinema or prize-winning postcolonial literature.

Yet in academic circles, at least, 'to speak of the exotic [...] is to condone all manner of European imperialisms and colonialisms, and to deliberately condemn the so-called 'subaltern' to continued misery' (Shapiro 2000: 41).

In my paper, which is part of a new research project I am currently developing, I wish to rehabilitate exoticism by focusing in particular on the contributions diasporic filmmakers have made to the emergence of a new kind of exoticism in contemporary cinema.

Drawing on Victor Segalen's posthumously published 'Essay on Exoticism' (2000), Chris Bongie (1991), Peter Mason (1998), Charles Forsdick (2000), Graham Huggan (2001) and Alison Griffiths (2002) insightful discussions of the exotic and exoticism, I shall attempt to define this elusive and contested concept. Associated with the long history of imperialism and colonialism, the subjugation and objectification of the subaltern and ethnic stereotyping, exoticism, alongside the related concept of Orientalism, is an aesthetic category and cultural practice that is burdened with highly pejorative connotations.

As I intend to illustrate, the kind of exoticism that we encounter in contemporary diasporic cinema is characterised by processes of reciprocity and exchange (see Khoo 2007). Compared with earlier films, such as Fritz Lang's *The Tiger of Eschnapur*

(1959) or British Raj revival films of the 1980s, which rely on the spectacularisation of cultural difference, the underpinning hierarchies have changed. The new kind of exoticism is no longer predominantly a projection of Western fantasies of the Other.

Instead of passively enduring the exoticising gaze, postcolonial diasporic filmmakers such as Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha are playing an active part in the construction of their own images. The critical and commercial success of films like *Water*, *Salaam Bombay* and *Bride and Prejudice* is, however, not as widely celebrated as one might expect and this despite the fact that it signals the growing recognition ethnic minority filmmakers are enjoying in the West.

Instead diasporic filmmakers are blamed for seeing themselves through western eyes, for colluding in strategies of 'auto-ethnography' (Pratt 1992), 're-Orientalism' (Lau and Mendes 2011) and self-exoticism in a bid for mainstream western audiences, often at the price of alienating domestic audiences in their real or putative 'homelands'.

Yet why are diasporic filmmakers expected to make culturally authentic films, whereas everyone else is entitled to create exotic fantasies? In fact, such is the allure of the exotic, and especially India, that majority culture filmmakers like Danny Boyle (*Slumdog Millionaire*), Michael Winterbottom (*Trishna*), John Madden (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*) and Lasse Halström (*The Hundred Foot Journey*) are jumping on the bandwagon and emulate the aesthetic strategies that have been tried and tested by their diasporic colleagues, deploying the recurrent visual tropes of exoticism, such as 'poverty chic', a vibrant, saturated colour scheme, 'ethnic' music and synaesthesia to evoke the intense sensory experiences associated with the exotic.

Biography:



Daniela Berghahn is Professor of Film Studies in the Media Arts Department at Royal Holloway, University of London. She has widely published on post-war German cinema, the relationship between film, history and cultural memory and transnational cinema. Her extensive work on migrant and diasporic cinema in Europe has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and is documented on the

websites www.farflungfamilies.net and www.migrantcinema.net. Daniela's publications include [Head-On](#) (BFI, 2015), [Far-flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema](#) (Edinburgh UP, 2013), [European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe](#) (co-edited with Claudia Sternberg, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and [Hollywood Behind the Wall: The Cinema of East Germany](#) (Manchester UP, 2005). Building on her work on diasporic and transnational European cinema, Daniela is working on a new project that explores exoticism in contemporary transnational cinema.