‘The Past Is a Foreign Country’: Exoticism and Nostalgia in Contemporary Transnational Cinema

Daniela Berghahn

Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, United Kingdom

Email: [Daniela.berghahn@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:Daniela.berghahn@rhul.ac.uk)

Daniela Berghahn is Professor of Film Studies in the Media Arts Department and Associate Dean for Research at the University of London, Royal Holloway College. She has widely published on post-war East and West German cinema and on the relationship between film, history and cultural memory. Her extensive work on migrant and diasporic cinema in Europe has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of Great Britain. Her publications include [*Head-On*](http://shop.bfi.org.uk/new-releases/head-on-gegen-die-wand.html#.VaPOlet-ouI) (BFI, 2015), [*Far-flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Far-Flung-Families-Film-Diasporic-Contemporary/dp/0748642900/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1368539377&sr=1-1&keywords=far-flung+families+in+film) (Edinburgh UP, 2013), [*European Cinema in Motion: Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/European-Cinema-Motion-Diasporic-Contemporary/dp/0230278981/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1368539604&sr=1-1&keywords=european+cinema+in+motion) (co-edited with C. Sternberg, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), [*Hollywood Behind the Wall: The Cinema of* *East Germany*](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Hollywood-Behind-Wall-Cinema-Germany/dp/0719061717)(Manchester UP, 2005), a special issue of *New Cinemas* (2009) on Turkish German cinema and [*Unity and Diversity in the New Europe*](http://www.peterlang.com/index.cfm?event=cmp.ccc.seitenstruktur.detailseiten&seitentyp=produkt&pk=47830)(Lang 2000). She is currently working on a project that explores exoticism in contemporary transnational cinemas.

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This article argues that global interconnectedness has resulted in cultural homogenisation and a growing disenchantment with the perceived deficiencies of contemporary (Western) culture. This has led, on the one hand, to an elegiac longing for an idealised past and, on the other, a buoyant interest in cultural difference, specifically, the exotic. The essay aims to advance scholarly debates on exoticism in cinema by tracing its close affinities with nostalgia, attending to the concepts’ shared aesthetic and ideological trajectories. Both mobilise distance, be it spatial or temporal, to enable an imaginative investment that replaces historical accuracy and cultural authenticity with the construction of an embellished past and an idealised alterity. The essay theorises and differentiates between the ‘imperialist nostalgia film’ and the ‘exotic nostalgia film’ by using Gurinder Chadha’s *Viceroy’s House* (2017) and Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000) as case studies. While the former fetishizes imperial power and control, thereby evoking nostalgia for the British Empire, the latter engenders a universal longing in the spectator for a time and place when intensity of feeling was possible. Although anchored in the cinematic text itself, nostalgia and exoticism also denote particular modes of aesthetic perception that are elicited in the spectator. Therefore, in a second line of argument, the article develops a model of transnational reception which explores the hypothesis that nostalgia and exoticism evoke different aesthetic responses in local and global spectators. While nostalgia is premised on familiarity and the remembrance of shared local traditions, the exotic gaze is that of an outsider to whom the cultural Other seems enigmatic and alluring.

Keywords: exoticism; nostalgia; imperialist nostalgia; transnational reception; *Viceroy’s House; In the Mood for Love*

This article aims to advance scholarly debates on the representation of cultural difference and, more specifically, the exotic in cinema, by bringing exoticism into dialogue with nostalgia. While nostalgia in Hollywood cinema and in British and European heritage cinema has received a significant amount of scholarly attention, two particular sub-categories which feature prominently in contemporary transnational cinema, the ‘imperialist nostalgia’ film (Rosaldo 1989) and, what I shall term the ‘exotic nostalgia film’, merit closer attention. Both combine an elegiac longing for an idealised past, constructed ‘as a site of pleasurable contemplation and yearning’ (Cook 2005: 4), with the spectacle of alluring alterity. However, as I shall illustrate, they differ in terms of their aesthetics and ideological agendas. Both nostalgia and exoticism stand in an antithetical relationship to modernity and can, in the broadest terms, be defined as aesthetic and discursive practices ‘intent on recovering “elsewhere” values “lost”’ (Bongie 1991: 5) at significant historical junctures. Thus, my chosen case studies are films that engage directly or indirectly with major historical turning points. Gurinder Chadha’s *Viceroy’s House* (2017) charts the end of British colonial rule over India in 1947 and Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* (2000) reflects the anxieties accompanying the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997 via nostalgia for British-ruled Hong Kong in the 1960s.

What distinguishes Chadha’s imperialist nostalgia film and Wong’s exotic nostalgia film from comparable period dramas such as *Out of Africa* (Sydney Pollack, 1985), *M. Butterfly* (David Cronenberg, 1993), *Indochine* (Régis Warnier, 1992), *Victoria and Abdul* (Stephen Frears, 2017), *Queen of the Desert* (Werner Herzog, 2015) and Raj revival films of the 1980s like *A Passage to India* (David Lean, 1984) and *Heat and Dust* (James Ivory, 1983), is that they are made by postcolonial diasporic filmmakers of Indian/Punjabi and Chinese/Shanghainese descent rather than by white Western majority culture filmmakers. Authorship deserves consideration in this context since it comes with a particular set of expectations. Postcolonial diasporic filmmakers are often seen as ‘native informants’, who are expected to provide ‘authentic’ accounts of their culture of origin. They are supposed to articulate anti-imperialist resistance instead of pandering to the predilections of metropolitan audiences by appropriating the dominant image repertoire and tropes of exotic alterity. Thanks to their multiple cultural attachments, diasporic filmmakers are exceptionally well positioned to act as ‘culture brokers, mediating the global trade in exotic – culturally “othered” – goods’ (Appiah cited in Huggan 2001: 26) in which alterity has become a prized commodity. Unless strategically deployed to subvert dominant codes of representing the cultural Other (cf. Huggan 2001: 32, 77), self-exoticisation is commonly regarded with suspicion because it is imbricated with the burdensome colonial legacy of exoticism. Yet, as exotic period dramas made by World Cinema filmmakers, including *Raise the Red Lantern* (Zhang Yimou, 1991)and *The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou, 1999), *Three Seasons* (Tony Bui, 1999), *Water* (Deepa Mehta, 2005), *Lust, Caution* (Ang Lee, 2007) and *Before the Rains* (Santosh Sivan, 2007) show, the collapsed distances of globalisation and the transnational flows of media and people have resulted in a decentring of the exotic, which can no longer be exclusively understood as the projection of exotic fantasies of the other from one centre, the West, but which emanates from multiple localities and is multi-directional in perspective. In contemporary World Cinema, ‘self-exoticisation, in which the ethnic, the local or the regional exposes themselves under the guise of self-expression, to the gaze of the benevolent other’ (Elsaesser 2005: 510) is deployed as a strategy to garner prestigious awards on the global film festival circuit, to engage transnational audiences and reap commercial rewards.

In this essay, I propose that imperialist and exotic nostalgia films speak differently to local and global audiences. In order to develop this hypothesis, I will invoke the concept of ‘enigmatization’, which Linda Chiu-han Lai has theorised with specific reference to Hong Kong nostalgia films of the 1990s. Hong Kong nostalgia films, she contends, ‘produce messages coded in ways that only a local audience can adequately interpret but that, nevertheless, remain comprehensible to an international audience on a more general level’ (Lai 2001: 232). In other words, nostalgia films grant local audiences the status of a ‘privileged hermeneutic community’, capable of decoding culturally specific references by virtue of a ‘shared textual horizon’ and the ‘remembrance of a shared popular tradition’ (Lai 2001: 232, 241). Whereas Lai does not problematise the concept of ‘local audiences’, I concur with Appadurai (1996: 48), who suggests that in a world characterised by accelerated transnational mobility and de-territorialization, the distinction between local and global spectators has assumed ‘a slippery, nonlocalized quality’. I, therefore, conceive of local and global spectators not primarily in geospatial terms, but rather in terms of the locally specific knowledge audiences bring to the reception of a particular film, regardless of where they actually live. Whereas Lai suggests that the transnational reception of Hong Kong nostalgia films results in an interpretative deficit since global audiences are missing certain locally specific nuances of meaning, I argue that, for global audiences, there remains a residue of enigma and a sense of mystery, which is an important feature of the films’ exotic allure. In other words, the affective relationship which local and global spectators develop in relation to exotic nostalgia films is different: whereas nostalgia is community building for local viewers, exoticism relies on and reinforces an outsider perspective. ‘The exotic gaze’, Charles Forsdick writes, ‘is a perspective “from the other side”, from outside and across geographical [or cultural] boundaries’ (Forsdick 2001: 21). It depends on the maintenance of boundaries, to ensure that cultural difference be preserved and perceived. I shall refine and probe this hypothesis when considering *Viceroy’s House* and *In the Mood for Love* by proposing a model of transnational reception that examines how aesthetic strategies, anchored in the cinematic text itself, have the capacity to elicit a nostalgic or exotic response in the spectator.

**Correspondences between exoticism and nostalgia**

There is a close affinity between exoticism and nostalgia. Both mobilise distance, be it spatial or temporal, to enable an imaginative investment that replaces historical accuracy and cultural authenticity with the construction of a sanitised and embellished past and an idealised alterity. The famous opening lines of L. P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between* (1953), ‘the past is a foreign country…they do things differently there’, encapsulates the chronotopic nature of nostalgia. It is simultaneously the longing for a distant place as well as the longing for a distant time, typically one’s childhood or what is perceived to be the golden age in the history of a nation.

Both the past, described by Salman Rushdie as ‘a country from which we have all emigrated’ (Rushdie 1992: 12), and the exotic are premised on the experience of loss and nostalgic longing. Chris Bongie contends in *Exotic Memories* that the exotic ceased to exist at the end of the nineteenth century as the result of cultural convergence and homogenisation on a global scale and has, henceforth, only continued to exist in cultural memory. Historically, it is inextricably linked to Romantic voyages of discovery during which the encounter with radical cultural difference in remote corners of the world prompted a mutual sense of astonishment and wide-eyed wonder (though historical records, travelogues and novels of adventure are invariably skewed towards the astonishment experienced by Europeans). ‘The exotic is not […] an inherent quality to be found “in” certain people, distinctive objects or specific places’ (Huggan 2001: 13). Instead it denotes a particular perception of cultural difference that arises from the encounter with foreign cultures, landscapes, animals, people and their customs that are either remote or taken out of their original context and ‘absorbed into a home culture, essentialized, simplified and domesticated’ (Forsdick 2003: 47-48). Colonial expansion and subsequent postcolonial migration resulted in persistent contact between different cultures so that what was once perceived as strange and exotic became familiar. It is precisely this ‘gradual loss of alternative horizons’ and the deep sense of nostalgia associated with cultural homogenisation and hybridisation that ‘generates exoticism’ (Bongie 1991: 4, 5), defined as a particular mode of cultural representation and discursive practice that renders something *as* exotic. In this sense, exoticism constructs a desired elsewhere, which is nostalgically imagined as geographically and/or temporally remote (Bongie 1991: 7). Ultimately, exoticism – like nostalgia – is ‘a story about loss (the loss of tradition, the loss of alternatives, the loss of the possibility of an “authentic experience”)’ (Bongie 1991: 6). Both discourses seek to salvage something that has ceased to exist.

Exoticism and nostalgia both spring from the perceived deficiencies of the present. Growing cultural interest in the exotic invariably emerges at moments of cultural crisis, when it serves as a spurious panacea for a nostalgic longing for a time and place imagined as better than one’s own. This holds particularly true for the nostalgic fascination with so-called ‘primitive’ cultures, imagined as ‘being stuck in an earlier stage of “culture” [ …] when compared with the West’ (Chow 1995: 22). Primitivism, and exoticism more broadly, reflect ‘a sense of exhausted whiteness’ (Negra 2002: 62) which projects fantasies of authenticity, abundance and sensuous intensity onto Other cultures. A similar sense of disenchantment with the present underpins nostalgia’s imaginative investment in the past, which operates through ‘historical inversion: the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past’ (Bakhtin cited in Hutcheon 2009: 250). As Linda Hutcheon suggests, the process of ‘nostalgic distancing sanitises as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent […] in other words, making it so very unlike the present’ (Hutcheon 2009: 250).

Both nostalgia and exoticism have attracted harsh criticism for fetishizing and commodifying the past or alterity and for offering it up to mass-market consumption on a global scale (cf. Huggan 2001: 28-33; Spengler 2009: 2). The visual pleasure nostalgia and exotic films are known to afford is frequently regarded with suspicion because it is seen to weaken or fully anaesthetise audiences’ critical capacities, thereby precluding intellectual interrogation and critical insight. Invoking Frederic Jameson’s (1983) influential critique, critics have not tired of reiterating that the nostalgia film and its close relative, the heritage film, project visions of the past in which ‘a critical perspective is displaced by decoration and display, a fascination with surfaces [and] the past is reproduced as flat, depthless pastiche’ (Higson 2006: 95). Meanwhile Graham Huggan takes issue with the ‘the global “spectacularisation” of cultural difference’, since it conceals ‘imperial authority through exotic spectacle’ (Huggan 2001: 15). Far from celebrating the steadily increasing interest in the postcolonial exotic in contemporary societies, which bestows cultural prestige and commercial success onto the works of postcolonial writers, filmmakers and other artists, he regards it as ‘a pathology of cultural representation under late capitalism’ (2001: 33) that transforms cultural difference into commodity fetishism.

As this essay seeks to demonstrate, I do not concur with the pejorative attitude, prevalent in particular amongst postcolonial scholars, who denounce exoticism and exotic cinema *tout court*. By contrast, I argue that exoticism is not necessarily false or politically incorrect but has a rightful place as an imaginary construction of the Other, or indeed the Self as Other. Whether it is ideologically retrograde or not, ultimately depends on the object of exotic desire. Contemporary transnational and world cinema offers numerous examples of where exoticism is harnessed to new ethico-political agendas that have nothing in common with its tainted colonial legacy. I further contend that the visual and sensuous pleasure which exotic cinema affords is not inevitably divorced from critical insight or even an oppositional stance. As Huggan has shown (2001: 33, 77), exoticist codes of representation can be deployed strategically to uncover and dislodge long established imperialist power hierarchies. And finally, exoticism’s visual and sensuous allure effectively compensates for the hermeneutic deficit which arises when world cinema, which offers windows onto ‘other’ cultures, is watched across borders. In this sense, it is an important aspect of world cinema’s transnational appeal.

Having charted how nostalgia and exoticism intersect and, despite being primarily interested in the *exotic* nostalgia film, it is nevertheless necessary to introduce its ideologically more problematic counterpart, the *imperialist* nostalgia film. Bongie’s distinction between ‘imperialist exoticism’, which ‘affirms the hegemony of modern civilization over less developed […] territories’ and ‘exoticising exoticism’, which ‘privileges those very territories and their peoples, figuring them as a possible refuge from an overbearing modernity’ (Bongie 1991: 17), identifies them as different manifestations of exoticism. But whereas the former serves to assert and legitimise colonial expansion and imperial power, the latter validates Other cultures by projecting those utopic and desirable qualities onto them which are perceived to be lacking in Western societies.

**The imperialist nostalgia film and *Viceroy’s House***

In a much-cited essay, the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo coined the term ‘imperialist nostalgia’, to which he alternately refers as an ‘elegiac mode of perception’, a ‘mood’ and an ‘emotion’ that ‘makes racial domination appear pure and innocent’ (Rosaldo 1989: 107, 108). He proposes that it revolves around a peculiar paradox:

Agents of colonialism […] often display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was “traditionally” (that is, when they first encountered it). The peculiarity of their yearning, of course, is that agents of colonialism long for the very forms of life they intentionally altered or destroyed […] and then regret […] that things have not remained as they were prior to his or her intervention. […] In any of its versions, imperialist nostalgia uses a pose of “innocent yearning” both to capture people’s imaginations and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination. (Rosaldo 1989: 107-8)

Although Rosaldo conceptualises imperialist nostalgia as a longing for the time *before* colonial expansion and domination, most critics who have adopted the concept and, indeed, the films cited by Rosaldo himself as examples, namely *Out of Africa* and British Raj revival films of the 1980s such as *Heat and Dust* or *A Passage to India*, actually exhibit a deep yearning for the days when Britain was the largest empire in history. Invariably set at a time of imperial decline, this particular type of heritage film simultaneously indulges in a glamorous imperial past and in the exotic allure of Europe’s former colonies.

Gurinder Chadha’s *Viceroy’s House* is part of a new wave of imperialist nostalgia, comprising British screen culture, examples being the BBC documentary series *The Birth of Empire: The East India Company* (BBC 2014) and *Indian Summers* (Channel 4, 2015-2016, set in the Raj’s summer capital Shimla in 1932) and the period drama *Victoria and Abdul* (about Queen Victoria’s affectionate friendship with her Indian servant Abdul). In the streets of London, echoes of Empire reverberate everywhere: The celebrated new Indian restaurant chain Dishoom recreates the colonial ambience and food of 1930s Bombay cafes, complete with retro washbasins in the dining area, faded advertisements and sepia photographs of bygone days. Like The East India Company, a new chain of luxury shops in London that, seemingly oblivious to its toxic heritage, markets itself as ‘history-infused tea & coffee sellers’, Dishoom is Indian-owned. What makes this latest nostalgia for the Raj different from its precursors is that Indians or Britons of Indian descent capitalise on it by selling ‘a commodified dream of the Raj to Britons’ (Jeffries 2015).

What exactly has sparked this imperial nostalgia boom in Britain now? Not unlike in the Thatcher era, the heyday of the Raj revival films, it has been interpreted as a response to the gloom of austerity resulting in a weakening of national pride and self-confidence. Hence the rallying cry of the Brexiteers ‘Britain will be great again’ – as if leaving the EU would automatically give Britons the Empire back. In fact, in a recent YouGov survey forty-four percent of Britons declared that they were proud of the British Empire, compared with just twenty-one per cent who regretted Britain’s imperial past (Stone 2016). Paul Gilroy offers a more complex explanation of the imperialist nostalgia boom. In *After Empire*: *Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (2004) and, more recently, in an article in *The Guardian* entitled ‘The best exotic nostalgia boom: Why colonial style is back’ (Jeffries 2015), Gilroy suggests that the British have never properly confronted and mourned the atrocities of colonial rule and, as a consequence, suffer from ‘postimperial melancholia’ (Gilroy 2004: 98). Indebted to the psychoanalysts Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich’s influential study on the West German people’s inability to mourn Hitler’s death ‘and the larger evil of which their love for him had been part’ (Gilroy 2004: 107), Gilroy argues that melancholia is a pathological condition that manifests itself when an individual or a nation wards off the process of mourning. Having failed to work through the loss of Empire and the uncomfortable truths about Britain’s colonial history, the British people revisit it obsessively. Whereas postimperial melancholia is ‘mourning’s pathological variant’, imperialist nostalgia is a form of outright guilt denial that allows Britons to fleetingly restore the lost greatness of the British Empire and feel proud of their history and national identity (Gilroy cited in Jeffries 2015). Despite having been dubbed ‘a British film with a Punjabi heart’ (Thorpe 2017), Chadha’s film is an apt example of the most recent recrudescence of Raj nostalgia.

*Viceroy’s House* charts India’s transition from being part of the British Empire to Partition and the founding of the two independent nations, India and Pakistan, in 1947. In India, the British-Indian co-production was released as *Partition: 1947*, but it was banned in Pakistan as it was felt to misrepresent Jinnah and the national interests of Pakistan (Bharathi 2017). The film seeks to tell history from above and below by adopting the upstairs-downstairs formula of *Downton Abbey* (ITV 2010-15) and casting Hugh Bonneville, the amiable Lord Grantham of this popular heritage television drama in the role of Lord Mountbatten. The narrative revolves around how Mountbatten, and his formidable wife Edwina (Gillian Anderson) manage momentous political change on the Indian subcontinent. The downstairs sub-plot, situated in the servant quarters, tells the story of star-crossed lovers Jeet (Manish Dayal) and Aalia (Huma Qureshi), whose love cuts across India’s religious divide between Hindus and Muslims. Only at the very end does this historical epic reveal itself to be a postmemory film in which the British-Indian filmmaker Chadha has a strong personal investment.[[1]](#endnote-1) A series of white-on-black intertitles states: ‘The Partition of India led to the largest mass migration in human history. 14 million people were displaced. One million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs died. This film is dedicated to all those who died and those who survived Partition’. An old black-and-white portrait of an Indian woman appears, accompanied by the text: ‘Including this mother who fled Pakistan for India with her children. Her baby daughter starved to death on the road’. The camera zooms out of the photo and the mother becomes part of a family portrait, surrounded by four children. The text reads: ‘After 18 months’ search, she was found by her husband in a refugee camp and the family was reunited’. As the portrait dissolves and black-and-white gives way to colour, the children surrounding their mother are transformed into their significantly older selves, while the mother is replaced by Gurinder Chadha. The accompanying text reads: ‘Her granddaughter is the director of this film’.

This revelation enables the filmmaker of Punjabi descent to assume the stance of shared victimhood with all the ‘political and psychological benefits […] the honoured place of suffering’ entails (Gilroy 2004: 103). The emotional impact of this unexpected disclosure, underscored by A. R. Rahman’s stirring sound track, stands in stark contrast to the film’s opening epigram, ‘History is written by the victors’. The director’s personal connection turns – what looks and feels like a British heritage film – into a postmemory film that articulates the trauma of Partition in the attempt to make the nostalgia for the glamour of the Raj ideologically more palatable. Whilst history is written by the victors, the postmemory of suffering, which is the avowed impetus behind this film, is to pay tribute to the victims; but the victims of what exactly? The violence of Partition or that of the British Empire?

Rather than making the suffering of the victims its main focus, the film’s cinematography celebrates the grandeur of the British Empire, captured in numerous aerial and wide-angle shots of the imposing Viceroy’s Palace, the British Raj’s seat of government in Delhi. Everything is on a grand scale, a reference to the vastness and power of the British Empire. The pageantry and the ‘mass ornament’ (Kracauer 1995) of hundreds of liveried Indian staff, dressed in pristine white and vibrant red uniforms, and moving in synchrony and symmetry – at the service of the British Viceroy – afford aesthetic pleasure.

Figure 1: The ‘mass ornament’ of Indian liveried staff intimates control

At the same time, the geometry of pattern reduces the people that form them to mere building blocks, ‘fractions of a figure’ (Kracauer 1995: 78), thereby de-individualising the Indian subjects and intimating the supreme order and control exerted by British colonial rule. This becomes all the more apparent if one compares the symmetry of the mise-en-scène and the geometrical patterns of lines and circles in which the Indian staff in the palace move and stand with the turmoil of Partition, which puts a sudden end to the film’s visual splendour. Captured partly in black-and-white footage and partly in colour, the incessant stream of Indian migrants is depicted as an amorphous mass that merges with the colour of the sand and the dust of the roads. The marked change in the film’s colour palette, from the vibrant hues of red and orange and crisp white of the uniforms and liveries at the Viceroy’s palace to a monochrome muddy brown, diminishes the mise-en-scène’s exotic appeal, given that high colour saturation is one of the hallmarks of exoticism.

While on a narrative level *Viceroy’s House* does not call into question the ethical imperative of ‘giving a nation back to its people’ (in the words of Mountbatten’s daughter), on a visual level it exhibits a nostalgic yearning for the grandeur and control of the British Empire. It thus reveals the same sense of ambivalence, or even schizophrenia, which Harlan Kennedy described with exquisite sarcasm in relation to the Raj revival films of the 1980s:

While our ears and eyes swoon to the éclat of majestic scenery, lovely costumes, and gosh all those elephants, our souls are being told to stay behind after class and get a ticking off for treating our colonial subjects so badly. For carving up other nations and leaving them to put the pieces together. For snobbery, cruelty and oppression. […] There’s a love-hate relationship with the Empire in British cinema that’s totally unresolved. Intellectually, we agree to eat humble pie about our imperial past. Emotionally, the impact of the India movies is to make us fall head over heels in love with the dear dead old days, when even Britain’s villainies were Big; when even its blunders and failures had tragic status; and when, if we had nothing else, goddammit, at least we had glamour (Kennedy 1985: 52).

What distinguishes Chadha’s film from the Raj revival films of the 1980s, however, is that it makes the genre’s irresolvable tension between nostalgia and colonial guilt more explicit. The director’s British-Punjabi background, with its ambivalent cultural and national allegiances, gives her an acute sensibility for the British, Indian and Pakistani perspectives. Although it was Chadha’s avowed intention to reach diverse transnational audiences and to convey a ‘message of reconciliation [that would…] speak to Pakistanis, to Indians, and to the British’ (*Viceroy’s House* Press Kit 2017), the film’s critical reception indicates that she could not square this circle. A review in the British magazine *The Economist* (2017)praises Chadha for filling ‘a gap in Britain’s collective consciousness and cultural memory’ and argues that ‘it will be hard for some to maintain a sense of nostalgia and triumphalism for Britain’s empire after watching *Viceroy’s House’*. Conversely, Fatima Bhutto (2017), a member of the politically prominent Bhutto family in Pakistan, describes *Viceory’s House* as the product ‘of a deeply colonised imagination […and] a sorry testament to how intensely empire continues to run in the mind of some today’. Arguably, these diametrically opposite verdicts result from the film’s generic hybridity. The juxtaposition of heritage cinema aesthetics and black-and-white documentary footage of the Partition represents an attempt to temper the nostalgia for the British Empire with a sense of postcolonial responsibility.

***In the Mood for Love* – an exotic nostalgia film**

Unlike *Viceroy’s House*, Wong Kar-wai’s *In the Mood for Love* does not engage explicitly with Hong Kong’s colonial heritage nor does it articulate an elegiac longing for a specific moment in its past. Instead the film exudes a nostalgic mood, a diffuse sense of loss whose appeal is as universal as it is locally specific to Hong Kong. Tony Rayns describes *In the Mood for Love* as a ‘requiem for a lost (colonial) time and its values’ (Rayns 2015: 43), while Vivian Lee (2009) sees it as part of the ‘nostalgia fever’ that seized Hong Kong from the late 1980s throughout the 1990s and that has been interpreted by Ackbar Abbas (1997) as a symptom of the handover anxieties that accompanied Hong Kong’s return to China in 1997. Although nostalgia is usually centred on a particular period, Hong Kong’s nostalgia fever lacked such a clearly identifiable object of loss and nostalgic desire. If there was ‘a place and time that clearly stood out’ as a reference point then it was Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s, ‘the glamorous decadence of the “Paris of the East” (Huppatz 2009: 15), whose fate as a cosmopolitan capitalist city taken over by China’s Communist regime in 1949 seemed to prefigure Hong Kong’s future.

The reference to Shanghai is salient for *In the Mood for Love* in more than one respect. The narrative is set in the 1960s amongst the Shanghainese diaspora, who live cheek-by-jowl in multi-occupancy rooming apartments in Hong Kong. This is where Chow Mo-Wan (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) and Mrs Chan, née Su Lizhen (Maggie Cheung), meet. When they discover that their respective spouses, who are frequently taking trips abroad, are having an affair, they spend more and more time together and eventually fall in love with each other. Yet determined not to be like their unfaithful spouses, they ostensibly never consummate their love.

Like the protagonists, Wong migrated with his family from Shanghai to Hong Kong when he was five years old. His childhood memories of a communal way of life, where privacy was scarce and gossip was rife, inform the film’s sense of place and narrative. The vanishing glamour of a nostalgically remembered Shanghai suffuses the mise-en-scène; Shanghainese is spoken alongside Cantonese; one of the many songs, ‘Huayang de Nianhua’ performed by the Shanghainese singer and actress Zhou Xuan in a movie in1947, is briefly heard on the radio and, more importantly, lent its title to the Mandarin release version of *In the Mood for Love* (Teo 2005: 10).

The most striking visual reference to Shanghainese culture is the dizzying array of no less than twenty-two cheongsams which Mrs Chan wears in *In the Mood for Love*. The dress changes are a marker of temporality, signalling the progression and repetition of time, specifically the time loops that characterise mourning as well as nostalgic recollection. As Stephen Teo puts it: ‘Maggie Cheung stepping out in high heels and cheongsam, handbag over an arm, hair perfectly coiffured, is the single most evocative image of nostalgia in the film’ (Teo 2005: 128). For Wong, the cheongsam is a nostalgia object to which he has personal attachments. As he stated in interviews, there was no need for him to research Maggie Cheung’s dresses, ‘because our mothers dressed like this’ (cited in Teo 2005: 11). I would like to propose that Mrs Chan’s cheongsams, ‘careful replicas of the 1930s Shanghai style created by a reputed tailor’ (Lee 2009: 32),simultaneously encapsulate the film’s nostalgic as well as its exotic appeal, inviting culturally specific readings amongst local and global spectators.

Figure 2: Mrs Chan’s cheongsams encapsulate the nostalgic and exotic appeal of *In the Mood for Love*

**The cheongsam – exotic or culturally hybrid?**

Although the cheongsam is widely regarded in the West as a quintessentially Chinese garment, its evolution since the beginning of the twentieth century suggests that it has absorbed different cultural influences from the East and the West and is thus hybridised. It was brought to China by the Manchu who imposed it upon the Han people (Clark 2000: 65). Originally a male garment, it was adopted by urban educated women in the early Republican period (1911-1949) as a signifier of women’s gender equality. The cheongsam’s transformation into the iconic dress of Chinese femininity occurred in Shanghai in the 1920s and thirties, where it was worn by ‘sing-song girls’ (or prostitutes) as well as film stars, who set fashion trends that were adopted by urban cosmopolitan women. When it was abolished under Mao Zedong’s Communist regime in the 1950s, which regarded it as bourgeois and incompatible with the ideals of communism, it was preserved as a symbol of Chinese cultural identity in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and elsewhere overseas. Since many wealthy Shanghainese migrated to British-ruled Hong Kong, followed by Shanghainese tailors, the cheongsam really came into its own there and ‘evolved under the influence of Western fashion […] and became the everyday wear of the colony’s urban woman, who wore a very fitted style accessorised with high-heeled shoes to create the fashionable image of slimness and height’ (Clark 2000: 23). Internationally, the British film *The World of Suzie Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960), which is set in Hong Kong in the milieu of seedy bars and prostitutes, reinforced the connection between the cheongsam and the sexual allure of the Oriental woman. During the 1950s and 1960s, the cheongsam had a significant impact on international fashion centres in Paris, Rome and New York on account of its perceived ‘“exoticism” and its slim line, which was then fashionable in Europe’ (Clark 2000: 27).

The recent fashion revival of the cheongsam during the pre-handover period of Hong Kong has been attributed to the diffuse nostalgia that anchored itself in the glamour of 1930s Shanghai and that led, amongst other things, to the establishment of Shanghai Tang, a luxury emporium that ‘produces Chinese exotica for a global market’ (Huppatz 2009: 28). Launched in Hong Kong in 1994, and subsequently in twenty-four other locations worldwide, Shanghai Tang’s cheongsam, either ready-to-wear or tailor-made by the store’s ‘Imperial Tailors’, is one of its most popular items. Mainland China eventually re-appropriated the previously outlawed garment and, at the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, hostesses were wearing uniforms that paid tribute to the national Chinese dress par excellence.

This brief excursion into the sartorial history of the cheongsam illustrates a number of salient features of the exotic, outlined in the first part of this essay: In a globalised world, unadulterated cultural difference is largely a fantasy and most expression of exotica, the cheongsam included, are culturally hybrid. Even so, the cheongsam has retained its status as the foremost sartorial icon of Chinese femininity, and is actively promoted as such in the global marketplace. In the process of transnational circulation, the cheongsam – not unlike the English manor houses of English heritage cinema (cf. Higson 2010: 71) – shifts from being an *ordinary* marker of Chinese cultural identity to an instantly recognisable signifier of *exotic* Chinese femininity.

**Exoticism and enigmatization**

It is such discrepancies in the interpretation of foreign, or familiar, cultural signifiers that Lai conceptualises as ‘enigmatization’ (Lai 2001), as discussed above. Maggie Cheung’s cheongsams function as a key device of ‘enigmatization’. For local audiences they evoke, first and foremost, nostalgic memories of Hong Kong in the 1950s and 1960s and associations with the impact of Shanghainese fashion and culture during those decades; for global audiences, by contrast, the cheongsam epitomises the exotic and erotic allure of the Oriental woman, imagined as enigmatic, seductive, yet restrained. Its figure-hugging cut emphasises the delicate feminine contours of Maggie Cheung while at the same time constricting her movements, forcing her to keep a perfectly upright posture and to take small, nimble steps. The high Mandarin-style collar, which conceals her décolletage, adds an air of self-discipline to her attire. Not unlike the constrictive corset of the Victorian era, which according to costume historian David Kunzle ‘represents a form of erotic tension and constitutes *ipso facto* a demand for erotic release, which may be deliberately controlled, prolonged and postponed’ (Kunzle cited in Bruzzi 2005: 44), the tight-fitting cheongsams in *In the Mood for Love* mobilise a similar tension between sexual desire and its repression.

In fact, the cheongsam is the material embodiment of the film’s romantic plot, encapsulating the irresolvable conflict between erotic desire and an old-fashioned moral restraint. Ultimately, the couple’s unconsummated love speaks to a universal nostalgia for ‘the past as a time when people believed in love’ (Teo 2005: 126), a feeling that has presumably ceased to exist in contemporary society. It is also pivotal to the narrative of Stanley Kwan’s *Rouge* (1987), another celebrated Hong Kong nostalgia film. The fact that Mrs Chan and Mr Chow’s love is, ostensibly, never consummated makes it all the more poignant. The scene showing the couple consummate their passion was shot but deleted by Wong shortly before the film’s release and is clearly marked as a narrative elision. A montage of shots showing Mrs Chan running up and down the stairs leading to hotel room 2046, which Chow Mo-Wan has rented, seemingly to be able to write undisturbed, but more likely to avoid the neighbour’s gossip, captures the moral conundrum accompanying her first visit. A cut to Mr Chow shows him inside room 2046, smoking and waiting for her. When she knocks on the door, the camera does not follow her inside. Instead a hard cut marks the ellipsis and shows Mrs Chan on the threshold, already leaving. His remark ‘I didn’t think you’d come’ is followed by her non-sequitur, ‘We won’t be like them’, a reference to their spouses’ affair – and perhaps also an oblique statement that, whatever may have happened between them, will not be repeated. Only the crimson billowing curtains in the dimly lit hallway and Mrs Chan’s bright red coat function as material correlatives of the couple’s desire, gesturing towards a possible passionate encounter off-screen. The emotional reticence surrounding the relationship is in large measure attributable to the film’s elliptical editing, which withholds narratively significant information and evokes a sense of mystery. Although I am not suggesting that local viewers are able to resolve the ambiguity surrounding the true nature of the lovers’ relationship, for global viewers, the enigma is heightened by the awareness of being cultural outsiders, who can never fully fathom the Other. In this sense, the film’s many elisions contribute to its exotic allure.

Conversely, the theme of romantic love whose qualities of renunciation and steadfastness are linked to the past invites comparisons with similar, old melodramas, such as David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945), Douglas Sirk’s *All that Heaven Allows* (1955) and Fei Mu’s *Spring in a Small City* (1948). Meanwhile Wong himself mentioned early Hong Kong melodramas, featuring the Chinese singer-actress Zhou Xuan such as *An All Consuming Love* (Zhaohang He, 1947) alongside Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958) as sources of inspiration (Teo 2005: 118-19). These various intertextual references go a long way in explaining the transnational appeal of *In the Mood for Love* since they allow for the exotic to be ‘domesticated’, that is to say, translated and integrated into a familiar context, thereby becoming legible. Bill Nichols describes the process of de- and recontextualization that underpins exoticism as making ‘the strange familiar […by] recover[ing] difference as similarity’ (Nichols 1994: 18) and suggests that it is one of the pleasures World Cinema affords transnational audiences. According to Nichols, ‘recovering the strange as familiar’ (Nichols 1994: 18) can take two forms: either discovering a common humanity that transcends cultural differences or recognising aesthetic forms and patterns familiar from European art cinema in World Cinema. *In the Mood for Love* is a perfect example, insofar as it deploys the universal theme of love and renunciation, coupled with the genre conventions of melodrama, to temper its foreignness and allow spectators across different cultural backgrounds to marshal diverse repertoires of cinematic reference points in the process of cultural translation.

The film’s eclectic musical score, which combines the sad waltz of ‘Yumeji’s Theme’ by the Japanese composer Umbeyashi Shigeru with popular Chinese songs by Zhou Xuan and Latino pop performed in Spanish by Nat King Cole, fulfils a similar function. At the same time this musical mélange blurs the line between exoticism and nostalgia given that tunes like ‘Aquellos ojos verdes’ and ‘Te quiero dijiste’ by Nat King Cole were international hits in the 1960s and therefore likely to evoke nostalgia in spectators all over the world.

**Exoticism** **and the aesthetics of sensuous indulgence**

Although a sense of enigma is unquestionably an essential feature of exoticism, it cannot fully account for exoticism’s allure. Exotic cinema is inextricably linked to spectacle. Ever since early cinema’s ‘travelogues’ or ‘scenics’ assumed a prominent role as a purveyor of exotic pleasures, inviting audiences to become armchair travellers who marvel at the ‘wondrous difference’ (Griffith 2002) of far-away lands, strange peoples and their customs, this particular type of the ‘cinema of attractions’ (Gunning 2011) has become associated with the spectacle of the exotic and the visual pleasure it affords. Contemporary exotic cinema continues to prioritise spectacle over narrative absorption, even if not throughout then at least in key filmic moments. If then Wong Kar-wai has been criticised for privileging visual pleasure and for furnishing stylish images that ‘elude narrative justification’ (Bettinson 2015: 58), then these critics have either failed to grasp the aesthetic principles of exoticism or have decided to deliberately denounce them. In other words, ‘moments of pure visual stimulation’ (Gunning 2011: 75) which invite the spectator to indulge in the elaborate visual style of *In the Mood for Love*, have by some critics been misconstrued as shallow MTV aesthetics, a ‘fashion magazine sensibility’ (Scott cited in Bettinson 2015: 59), and as a form of aesthetic self-indulgence (Thomson cited in Bettinson 2015: 59). These charges are not dissimilar to those regularly levelled at the museum aesthetics of heritage cinema, namely, an obsession with glossy images that invites spectators to become absorbed purely on an aesthetic level, which allegedly precludes any form of critical engagement.

Chris Doyle and Mark Lee Ping-bin’s distinctive cinematography coupled with William Chang’s retro production design create a self-consciously aestheticized world in which even the banal and quotidian reveal their immanent beauty. The many tableaus in which the colours of door and window frames echo those of Maggie Cheung’s cheongsams, lend the film an overtly painterly quality. In addition to nuanced colour palettes, the repetition of similar geometric patterns in the wallpaper and the fabric of the dress, invite the spectator to feast their eyes on carefully composed images and symphonies of colour. The insistent use of frames (reminiscent of Douglas Sirk’s visual style) and visual obstructions that are unmotivated by a character’s point-of-view self-consciously emphasise the gesture of display.

Figure 3: Nuanced colour palettes lend the film a painterly quality and reveal the beauty of the ordinary

Perhaps the most prominent cinematographic device, which invites the spectator to pause and surrender to the visual splendour of images, is what Vivian Sobchack has termed ‘the exhibitionism of slow motion’ (Sobchack 2006: 347). Slow motion defamiliarizes mundane activities, such as Mrs Chan’s descent down the narrow winding stairs to fetch noodles in her pale green and silver thermos at the nearby *daibaitong,* or Mrs Chan and Mr Chow’s walk home along the dimly lit streets of Hong Kong, and transfigures them into moments of intense aesthetic pleasure. The slow motion, accompanied by the sad waltz of Yumeji’s Theme and Nat King Cole’s ‘Aquellos ojos verdes’, lends these sequences a dance-like quality, while the character’s seemingly weightless, floating movements underscore the ephemeral nature of fading memories.

Visual spectacle alone does not adequately account for the exoticism of Wong’s film, which goes far beyond an ‘aesthetic of visual indulgence’ (Lee 2009: 23), provoking instead a multisensory response in the spectator. The camera seems to caress the texture of surfaces, whether it is masonry pock-marked with greenish lichen in Angkor Wat, the crumbling plaster and peeling posters in the alleyways, the smooth reflection of speckled old mirrors, or the glistening wet rain on a street lamp and on Chow’s jet black hair. The close-ups of these coarse, smooth and wet surfaces emphasise tactile impressions and, as such, would appear to deftly illustrate what Laura Marks has theorised as ‘haptic visuality’ if it were not for the fact that Marks asserts that ‘haptic images refuse visual plenitude [and deliberately….] counter viewers’ expectations of […] exotic visual spectacle’ (Marks 2000: 177). Yet Marks’ assertion is arguably borne out of her programmatic intent to promote an ‘intercultural cinema’ of a more experimental, ethnographic type that ‘represents sense knowledges not from a position of wealth but of scarcity’ (Marks 2000: 239), which she contrasts with more dominant cinemas, including ‘art-house imports’ that represent ‘sense knowledges [merely] as commodities’ (Marks 2000: 239). Wong’s aesthetics of sensuous indulgence depends precisely on the *combination of* visual spectacle and haptic visuality, referring to a particular type of embodied perception that invokes memories of touch, with other forms of synaesthesia (the perception of one sensation by another modality) and intermodality (the linking of sensations from different domains) in order to reproduce the multi-sensory pleasure associated with exoticism.

‘Sense longing’, to use Laura Marks’ (2000: 240) evocative term, denoting the pursuit of sensory stimulation and indulgence, has always been one of the chief driving forces behind exotic quests and conquests, be it the importation of spices and stimulants like coffee and cocoa which was part of the colonial enterprise, or the exotic/erotic pleasures which Louis Antoine de Bougainville, Paul Gaugin, Victor Segalen and countless other travellers described and depicted when they believed to have found paradise on earth in Tahiti and other Polynesian islands. The encounter with the exotic Other has traditionally been imagined as a re-awakening of the senses that have been dulled by the repetitive humdrum of modernity. Hence, for Segalen, an important commentator on exoticism, the experience of the exotic Other culminates in an ‘Intensity of *Sensation*, the exaltation of Feeling; and therefore of living’ (Segalen 2002: 61). *In the Mood for Love* speaks to contemporary Western societies’ anhedonia and desire to escape the perceived blandness of Western culture by inviting spectators to sense ‘how other people sensuously inhabit their world’ (Marks 2000: 241).

Paradoxically, however, the quote from the Shanghainese writer Liu Li-Chang, with which the film concludes, appears to contradict the film’s numerous haptically charged images: ‘He remembers those vanished years as though looking through a dusty windowpane. The past is something he could see, but not touch. And everything he sees is blurred and indistinct’. The lines are worth citing here since the inherent contradiction heightens the sense of enigma while simultaneously identifying *In the Mood for Love* as a nostalgic memory film that emphatically foregrounds ‘the imperfect retrieval of memory’ (Rayns 2015: 81) as one of its key concerns.

**Conclusion**

As I hope to have demonstrated in the close analysis of the two case studies, imperialist and exotic nostalgia films differ from each other in terms of their aesthetic and ideological trajectories. While both types of nostalgia film glamourise the past through sumptuous images and high production values, the wide-angle shots and mass ornament which fetishize imperial power and control in *Viceroy’s House* have (except for the use of vibrant colours) little in common with the spell-binding beauty of images and aesthetics of sensuous indulgence of *In the Mood for Love* that engenders a more universal longing for a time or place where intensity of feeling was possible.

Both case studies complicate my initial hypothesis that imperialist and exotic nostalgia films deploy particular aesthetic strategies that evoke a nostalgic yearning for an idealised past in local and a desire for an exoticised Other in global spectators. *Viceroy’s House* is a British heritage film that, arguably, exoticises Britain’s imperial past more than it exoticises India, thereby calling the distinction between an exotic and a nostalgic spectatorial response into question. While there is no doubt that the film has the capacity to evoke nostalgia in some, ideologically so predisposed British spectators, it is questionable whether it can elicit a similar affective resonance on the Indian sub-continent. The Indian film reviews I was able to access do not suggest this. *In the Mood for Love* is ultimately a sophisticated pastiche of Eastern and Western influences that challenges the notion of a pure, unhybridized local culture and, by implication, the idea that only a local community of spectators with insider knowledge into 1960s Hong Kong culture can experience nostalgia.

I wish to illustrate this point with a personal anecdote. I remember my own mother wearing cheongsam-inspired silk dresses in 1960s West Germany. Perhaps, this is not surprising given the cheongsam’s well-documented impact on international fashion. One in particular I have never forgotten. It was a beautifully tailored black silk dress with a large bright turquoise and a pale yellow stylised flower printed diagonally across from the waist to the hemline. And she wore her dark hair coiffured in a style similar to that of Maggie Cheung, elegant yet entirely motionless. For me, watching Wong’s film over and over again has been an exotic, but simultaneously also a nostalgic pleasure, because the film’s costume and production design, alongside Nat King Cole’s Latino pop songs, continuously oscillate between the strange and the familiar.

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Acknowledgement

I presented an earlier version of this essay, entitled ‘Nostalgia and Exoticism as Tactics of Audience Engagement in Contemporary World Cinema’ at the NECS Conference in Amsterdam on 28 June 2018.

1. According to Marianne Hirsch, who developed the concept in relation the children of Holocaust survivors, postmemory is ‘distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection’ (Hirsch 1997: 22). Whereas history may elide or even purposely obliterate memories that cannot be reconciled with official (often heroic) accounts of the past, the ‘deep personal connection’ that underpins postmemory accords a rather different meaning and affective value to events that would otherwise be forgotten or repressed. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)