

Performing Exoticism and the Transnational Reception of World Cinema

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Abstract

This article examines why exoticism is central to thinking about the global dynamics of world cinema and its transnational reception. Offering a theoretical discussion of exoticism, alongside the closely related concepts of autoethnography and cultural translation, it proposes that the exotic gaze is a particular mode of aesthetic perception that is simultaneously anchored in the filmic text and elicited in the spectator in the process of transnational reception. Like world cinema, exoticism is a travelling concept that depends on mobility and the crossing of cultural boundaries to come into existence. The visual pleasure afforded by exotic cinema's sumptuous style is arguably the chief vehicle that allows world cinema to travel and be understood, or misunderstood, as the case may be, by transnational audiences who are potentially disadvantaged by a hermeneutic deficit of culturally specific knowledge when trying to understand films from outside their own cultural sphere.

Dieser Artikel untersucht, warum der Exotismus von zentraler Bedeutung ist, um die globale Dynamik des World Cinema und seine transnationale Rezeption zu verstehen. Indem er eine Theorie des Exotismus vorlegt, und zugleich auf die eng verwandten Begriffe der Autoethnografie und der kulturellen Übersetzung eingeht, stellt er die These auf, dass es sich

beim exotischen Blick um eine besondere Form ästhetischer Wahrnehmung handelt, die einerseits im filmischen Text verankert ist und andererseits bei der transnationalen Rezeption im Zuschauer ausgelöst wird. Wie das World Cinema ist auch der Exotismus ein Begriff auf Wanderschaft, der auf Mobilität und die Überschreitung kultureller Grenzen angewiesen ist, um sich überhaupt erst zu manifestieren. Die Schaulust am opulenten Stil des exotischen Kinos ermöglicht es dem World Cinema, zu reisen und von einem transnationalen Publikum, das möglicherweise durch ein hermeneutisches Defizit an kulturspezifischem Wissen benachteiligt ist, verstanden bzw. missverstanden zu werden, wenn es versucht, Filme von außerhalb seines eigenen Kulturkreises zu verstehen.

Keywords:

exoticism

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The study of world cinema is one of the most vibrant and fastest growing areas in film studies. Encompassing global art cinema as well as popular genre films and their transnational reception, world cinema is an amorphous and critically versatile concept that invites contestation and debate. This article aims to make a contribution to this urgent critical endeavour, not by mapping the various critical debates that surround the concept of world cinema, but, instead, by exploring the role exoticism plays in the transnational reception of world cinema. I will explore how non-Western filmmakers, variously referred to as ‘world cinema’, ‘postcolonial’ and ‘diasporic’, exoticise their own cultures, thereby enhancing the transnational appeal of their films. Offering a theoretical discussion of exoticism, alongside the closely related concepts of autoethnography and cultural translation, the article proposes that exoticism is a particular mode of aesthetic perception that is simultaneously anchored in the filmic text and elicited in the spectator in the process of transnational reception. In fact, as Charles Forsdick (2001: 21) has persuasively argued, ‘the exotic gaze is a perspective “from the other side”, from outside and across geographical [or cultural] boundaries’. It depends on the maintenance of boundaries, lest cultural difference and the sense of astonishment and wonder it evokes in the beholder, be preserved. But at the same time, it is (like world cinema) a travelling concept that depends on mobility and the crossing cultural boundaries to come into being.

The term ‘world cinema’ has been coined in analogy to Goethe’s conceptualisation of *Weltliteratur* (world literature) by which he meant not only foreign literature, but also the reception of domestic literature abroad as well as his own literary translations (Birus 2004). Goethe was particularly interested in the European reception of the foreign, which points towards the Eurocentric perspective underpinning world literature. The chief attraction which

both world literature and world cinema hold for their recipients is the promise of offering windows onto foreign worlds that are (imagined as) profoundly different from the West (cf. Dennison/Lim, 2006: 2; Nagib/Perriam/Dudrah, 2012: xix). According to David Damrosch (2003: 175), ‘works become world literature by being received into the space of a foreign culture, a space defined in many ways by the host culture's national tradition and the present needs of its own writers’. Rather than conceiving of world literature as a canon of foreign literary masterpieces, Damrosch describes it as a mode of transnational circulation and reception that gains in translation. The same holds true for world cinema, which must travel from its site of origin and be watched by audiences originating from different nations, regions or cultures. In other words, the transnational dimension inherent in the concept of world cinema is constituted in the process of reception, as a film moves outside its own national sphere into another one. Much of contemporary world cinema is, in addition, also transnational in terms of its modes of global cultural production and funding. Moreover, its transnational appeal is usually part of a deliberate strategy which non-Western filmmakers deploy to pander to the tastes and expectations of Western critics and audiences. To be sure, this does not normally apply to popular genre films predominantly targeting domestic viewers, although these sometimes ‘become art films when exhibited abroad’ (Galt/Schoonover, 2010: 7) or, as the case of the *wuxia pian* (Chinese swordplay film) illustrates, are adopted by world cinema auteurs like Wong Kar-wai (*Yi Dai Zong Shi/The Grandmaster*, Hong Kong/China, 2013) and Hou Hsiao-hsien (*Cike Nie Yin Niang/The Assassin*, Taiwan/China/Hong Kong/France, 2015), who transform them into refined arthouse films. Thus, the kind of world cinema under consideration here is also known as ‘global art

cinema' and conceived with global cinephiles rather than local mainstream audiences in mind.¹

This raises the question how global art cinema squares the circle of conveying a sense of local authenticity (one of the main attractions world cinema holds in store) while being simultaneously intelligible and appealing across different cultures. Considering contemporary Chinese cinemas which, because of their regional dispersal across the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora, are widely regarded as a paradigmatic example of transnational cinema, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997: 12) argues that, ironically, 'some films achieve transnational status precisely because they are seen as possessing an authentically "national," Chinese," "Oriental" flavor by Western audiences. In the meantime, the domestic audience dismisses the same films as "misrepresentations" and "mystifications" of China'.

The exotic and exoticism

The word 'exotic' was first introduced into the English language in 1599, meaning 'alien, introduced from abroad, not indigenous'. During the nineteenth century 'exotic' gained the connotation of 'a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be (safely) spiced. The key conception here is the introduction of the exotic from abroad into a domestic economy' (Ashcroft/Griffiths/Tiffin, 2000: 94). Historically, the exotic is inextricably linked to eighteenth-century voyages of exploration 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

¹ For a theorisation of global art cinema, cf. Galt/Schoonover, 2010: 3-27. While world cinema includes popular genre films like Bollywood and Nollywood melodrama or Hong Kong action films, global art cinema does not, with certain exceptions, discussed by Galt and Schoonover.

novels of adventure are invariably skewed towards the astonishment experienced by *Europeans*). It thus follows that, ‘the exotic is not [...] an inherent quality to be found “in” certain people, distinctive objects or specific places’ (Huggan, 2001: 13), but instead denotes a particular perception of cultural difference that arises from the encounter with foreign cultures, landscapes, animals, people and their customs that are either geographically remote or taken out of their original context and ‘absorbed into a home culture, essentialized, simplified and domesticated’ (Forsdick, 2003: 48).

While the term ‘exotic’ denotes the imaginary qualities or essence of difference that are projected on to cultures as well as natural environments that are radically different from one’s own, ‘exoticism’ describes a particular representational strategy or, as Graham Huggan (2001: 13) writes in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, a ‘mode of aesthetic perception [...] which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness even as it claims to surrender to its immanent mystery’. In order for exoticism to enable the kind of imaginative investment that replaces cultural authenticity with the construction of an idealised (or, conversely, threatening) form alterity it needs to traverse spatial (and frequently also temporal) distances, as well as cultural and/or national borders. That is why exoticism has also been conceptualised as a form of cultural translation, namely the process by which one culture tries to make sense of another – and not just their foreign language, but also their traditions, rituals and their entire way of life. Although this kind of cultural translation has, historically, been the domain of ethnography, it is by no means restricted to the scientific discourse on cultural difference. White Western writers, painters and filmmakers have equally partaken in the process of cultural translation

by making foreign people, their cultures and traditions, the different flora and fauna of their habitats the object of the exotic gaze, with all the inequities of power and agency this entails.²

Performing exoticism, autoethnography and cultural translation

Although the dynamics of globalisation have profoundly changed the configurations of Self and Other and challenged the Western ethnographer's authority to interpret the signifying systems of supposedly subordinate societies, according to Rey Chow (1995: 177), we still 'cannot write/think/talk the non-West in the academy without in some sense anthropologizing it'. This explains why non-Western filmmakers are often expected to act as native informants and interpreters whose role it is to provide 'authentic' accounts of their cultures of origin. Against this background, contemporary world cinema and the global film festival circuit, its prime site of exhibition, can be understood as a new type of 'contact zone', which Mary Louise Pratt has famously theorised in the colonial context as the intercultural space of symbolic exchange and transculturation, catering for cosmopolitan cinephiles and their interest in cultural difference. Pratt (1992: 4) defines contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today'. She describes the intercultural encounters occurring in the contact zone as 'interactive', as the constitution of subjects 'in and by their

² Although this article examines how some contemporary world cinema filmmakers exoticise their *own* cultures, world cinema also exoticises *other* cultures. A prime example is Bollywood cinema's exoticisation of Switzerland, notably the Swiss Alps, discussed in Alexandra Schneider's anthology (2002). David Martin-Jones (2009: 67-88) explores the related issue of how Bollywood and South Asian diasporic cinema represent Scottish locations not through the exotic but, instead, through the tourist gaze.

relations to each other' (Pratt 1992: 7). If we conceive of world cinema and its transnational exhibition on the film festival circuit (and beyond) as such a contact zone then the interactive exchange occurring in this space is, on the one hand, the expectation of metropolitan audiences to encounter a particular kind of world cinema that corresponds to their exotic fantasies of Other cultures and, on the other hand, the creation of 'autoethnographic texts', that is, films made by non-Western filmmakers which 'appropriate the idioms' of 'metropolitan representation' (Pratt 1992: 7).

Whether or not this kind of autoethnography is a deliberate strategy or an unconscious process is one of the questions that Rey Chow addresses in her study *Primitive Passions* on Fifth Generation Chinese cinema and Chinese visual culture more broadly. She regards fiction films such as Chen Kaige's *Huang tu di* (*Yellow Earth* China, 1984) and Zhang Yimou's award-winning *Ju Dou* (China/Japan, 1990) and *Dahong Denglong Gaogaoguo* (*Raise the Red Lantern*, China/Hong Kong/Taiwan, 1991) as a new type of ethnography 'practiced by those who were previously ethnographized and who have, in the postcolonial age, taken up the active task of ethnographizing their own cultures' (Chow, 1995: 180). Yet rather than challenging the unequal power hierarchies implied in the ethnographer's act of looking, in which non-Western cultures are invariably the object of the gaze, Fifth Generation Chinese filmmakers actively replicate 'the state of being looked at' in their films (Chow, 1995: 180). Whereas the agency implied in the act of seeing is a form of power, being looked at is disempowering (a point also made by Laura Mulvey (1975) in her seminal essay on visual pleasure and the gendered scopic regimes of classical Hollywood cinema). In contrast to other scholars, who harshly criticise certain world cinema filmmakers for becoming complicit in Western cross-cultural modes of representation, such as exoticism and Orientalism, when making films about their own cultures, Chow regards it as the inevitable consequence of bearing the 'memory of past *objecthood* – the experience of being looked at –

which lives on in the subjective act of ethnographizing like an other, an optical unconscious' (Chow 1995: 180). If we concur with Chow, then world cinema can never give a 'true' or 'authentic' representation of China, India, Africa or other cultures, since centuries of European cultural hegemony have conditioned non-Western filmmakers to see themselves through Western eyes. But Chow goes one step further, suggesting that any form of cultural translation, whether it is ethnography or the kind of autoethnography underpinning exotic world cinema, is necessarily a form of distortion or even betrayal.³ Firstly, as 'the Italian expression *Traduttore, traditore* – "Translator, traitor"' implies, the task of translating is associated with 'the pejorative implication of infidelity' (Chow 1995: 183). And secondly, because the idea of an 'original', 'authentic', or 'pure Other culture, 'uncontaminated' by Western and other influences is an essentialist fallacy, especially in a world of global interconnectedness and hybridisation, in which the very notion of cultural purity has become a fantasy. In fact, the dogmatic insistence on cultural fidelity is incompatible with the multiple processes of cultural translation that shape world cinema.

Cultural translation denotes 'the transformative dynamic that is forged by the interaction of different cultures'. It results in 'creative reconfigurations' that occur when 'the space of boundedness' is disturbed by 'the forces of mobility' (Papastergiadis, 2011: 2, 3). It is worth emphasising that cultural translation shapes world cinema at every single stage. It begins, if we agree with Chow, with filmmakers' internalisation of the exotic gaze or, alternatively, their strategic performance of exotic Otherness in order to satisfy the expectations of Western critics, festival juries and audiences. It also applies to the various mechanisms of transnational film funding and co-production, circulation and distribution,

³ I am, of course, not suggesting that all world cinema filmmakers perform exoticism. In fact, realism appears to be the more prevalent aesthetic approach taken and certainly the one to receive far more critical attention, cf. Nagib 2011, 2020; de Luca 2013.

since the selection procedures involved tend to privilege a particular type of global art cinema that promises to appeal to metropolitan cinephiles. And finally, it manifests itself in the transnational reception process in which cultural outsiders are trying to make sense of films whose cultural-historical context and signifying systems are largely unknown to them. Much gets lost in translation while, conversely, new meanings, whether fitting or not, get superimposed. Therefore, transnational reception and cross-cultural analysis are potentially fraught with problems, tempting film critics and scholars to 'read works produced by the Other through the constraints of one's own frameworks, theories and ideologies' (Kaplan 1997: 266) and, in so doing, become complicit in a new form of cultural imperialism. Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu (1997: 128) even goes so far as to consider the critical reception of Chinese cinema and visual culture in the West as a form of cultural appropriation:

Previously, it was the role of China specialists to translate and introduce artistic works from China to the Western audience. Now, in a remarkable reversal of fortune, it is the West that points out what is outstanding and characteristically Chinese in artworks from China. The viewers and critics of the home country can do nothing but be astounded by and follow the judgement of the authority of the Western world.

Chinese intellectuals are in a stupor, remain aphasic, and are unable to speak and pass judgment on the works of their own country.

To try and prevent the disjunctures arising when cultural outsiders attempt to understand and analyse world cinema is impossible. However, to reserve this right for 'native' critics and scholars would constitute a form of cultural essentialism that ultimately defeats world cinema's main attraction, namely, to offer windows onto other worlds. Furthermore, as defendants of cultural translation have argued, such hermeneutic collisions and

reconfigurations are actually highly productive interactions that bring about cultural innovation, provided that the power differentials are not too extreme (Papastergiadis, 2011: 7).

Arguably the most dynamic site of cultural translation is the film festival circuit since it is here where the first contact in this cross-cultural encounter usually occurs and where global art cinema's meaning and artistic value is negotiated. Bill Nichols's (1994: 16, 18) evocative description of film festivals as a new type of contact zone where cosmopolitan cinephiles can enjoy 'an abiding pleasure in the recognition of [cultural] differences' reaffirms Chow's argument that the encounter with the non-West is inevitably imagined in ethnographic terms. In fact, Nichols compares the festivalgoer's experience with that of an anthropological fieldworker (and tourist), who becomes submerged 'in an experience of difference, entering strange worlds, hearing unfamiliar languages, witnessing unusual styles' (Nichols 1994: 17). Although the encounter with the strange and unfamiliar is one of the principal fascinations that world cinema affords transnational audiences, it invariably triggers the reflex 'to recover the strange as familiar' (Nichols 1994: 18), or to use the term I introduced in relation to the exotic, to 'domesticate' it. This usually takes 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.

The cultural translation of world cinema corresponds with the de- and recontextualization of the exotic, whose alluring alterity only manifests itself when it is perceived by someone belonging to a different cultural sphere. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that world cinema *per se* is decoded as exotic. For example, the documentary realist aesthetics of the Iranian New Wave films, which Nichols uses as a case study in his essay, is far too austere to qualify as exotic. Likewise, we only need to consider Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films, whose radical alterity make them extremely enigmatic,

if not utterly perplexing for global audiences, to appreciate that they lack two essential characteristics of exoticism: firstly, their extreme Otherness precludes ‘domestication’, that is, integration into a familiar system of aesthetic and conceptual reference points and, secondly, they are largely devoid of the visual and sensuous allure that is a hallmark of exotic cinema.

Decoding the exotic in world cinema

How then are certain global art films decoded as exotic, while others are simply strange or bewildering? What particular qualities do films as diverse as *Raise the Red Lantern*, *L’Odeur de la papaye verte* (*The Scent of Green Papaya*, Tran Anh Hung, France/Vietnam, 1993), *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*, Alfonso Arau, Mexico, 1992), *Fayeung nin wa* (*In the Mood for Love*, Wong Kar-wai, Hong Kong/China, 2000), *Three Seasons* (Tony Bui, Vietnam/USA, 2000), *Water* (Deepa Mehta, Canada/India, 2007), *The Assassin*, *Tanna* (Martin Butler/Bentley Dean, Australia/Vanuatu, 2015) and *El abrazo de la serpiente* (*Embrace of the Serpent*, Ciro Guerra, Columbia/Venezuela/Argentina, 2015) possess to elicit the exotic gaze in the spectator? Their common denominator is, as I shall illustrate, that they resonate with the multi-faceted iconography of exoticism. Exoticism functions like a hermeneutic circuit that relies on the appropriation and reworking of established iconographic conventions and narrative tropes in order to be recognised as such. That is why, in the words of Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996: 6), ‘the exotic is always already known [...] explorers, anthropologists and tourists voyage to foreign places in search of the novel, the undiscovered. What they find [...] is what they already knew they would find, images predigested by certain “platitudes and commonplaces”’. Rony’s observation goes a long way in explaining why exotic forms of cultural representation often seem clichéd and stereotypical.

Identifying one of the most prevalent iconographic conventions of exoticism, Victor Segalen (2002: 13), one of the chief commentators on exoticism, writes: ‘Exoticism is willingly “tropical”. Coconut trees and torrid skies. Not much Arctic in exoticism’. Segalen’s slim volume *Essay on Exoticism: An Aesthetics of Diversity* was posthumously published and is an unfinished fragment that reflects his impressions of Tahiti and China whereto he travelled between 1902 and 1919. He was following in the footsteps of the painter Paul Gauguin, whose colourful paintings of semi-nude Polynesian women against the backdrop of lush tropical scenery have shaped the Western imagination of the Polynesian islands. This particular imaginary, however, dates back much further. Ever since Louis-Antoine de Bougainville (in 1768) and other European explorers travelled to Polynesia and perceived the islanders as the incarnation of Rousseau’s ideal of the natural man, untouched by the corrupting influence of Western civilisation, the South Pacific islands have come to epitomise paradise on earth (Childs 2013; Connel 2003). In cinema, Robert Flaherty’s ethnographic documentary *Moana* (USA, 1926) and Friedrich W. Murnau’s feature film *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (USA, 1931) have established the South Sea film genre that continues to determine the exotic iconography of contemporary films set in this region. Palm trees and giant ferns, dense lush forests with waterfalls convey a sense of natural abundance and pristine nature. *Tanna*, made by the white Australian documentary filmmakers Martin Butler and Bentley Dean in collaboration with the Indigenous community of Tanna island (part of Melanesia) and which won the Audience Award as well as the prize for best cinematography at the Venice Film Festival in 2015 is an apt example.⁴ Although most critics have described

⁴ The fact that *Tanna* as well as *Embrace of the Serpent*, which is set in the Amazon, were made in collaboration with Indigenous communities, who are credited with being the chief creative impetus and co-creators of these films makes them not only politically correct but, arguably, also examples of self-exoticisation.

it as a Romeo and Juliet story set in the South Pacific, in terms of its iconography and, indeed, narrative conceit of star-crossed lovers *Tanna* betrays far more conspicuous similarities with Murnau's *Tabu*. The male protagonist's crown of fern fronds and the young woman's garland of leaves and bark skirt recall the almost identical natural attire of Matahi and Reri in *Tabu* and are a staple of visual representations of the South Pacific. Tannese children and the star-crossed lovers frolicking amid ferns and fronds and a native heralding a call to all villagers on conch shell are further references to what can be regarded as the cinematic *Urtext* of the South Sea genre (cf. Berghahn 2017: 29).

Figure 1: *Tanna* invokes the exotic iconography of earlier South Sea films

Vibrant colours, ancient rituals and traditions (both real or invented), a sense of pastness or 'primitive' backwardness in relation to the 'progressive' West, iconic costumes like the loincloth, the sari or the cheongsam that essentialise cultural identities, topographies like the South Sea islands or the Amazonian rainforest, waterscapes covered in carpets of floating lotus flowers or bustling street markets, sensuality, lushness and abundance and a sense of enigma and mystery are all, in varying degrees and combinations, essential ingredients of exoticism. They allow transnational audiences to 'domesticate' the foreign by integrating it into the established aesthetic paradigm of exoticism, which has evolved over many centuries and has been made subservient to shifting ideological and political agendas. Since exoticism invariably spectacularises cultural difference it is regularly censured for concealing the uneven power hierarchies that undergird colonialism and its ideological and aesthetic legacies by offering visual pleasure, the implication being that visual pleasure is something like an opiate that anaesthetises the spectator's critical capacities, thereby precluding intellectual

interrogation and critical distance. In short, it turns cultural difference into a form of commodity fetishism. Most critics in the West denounce exotic cinema and its commodification of cultural difference as unethical and exploitative. Ron Shapiro (2000: 41) sums up the pejorative attitude, prevalent in particular amongst postcolonial scholars, with acerbic cynicism: 'To speak of the exotic [...] is to condone all manner of European imperialisms and colonialisms, and to deliberately condemn the so-called sub-altern to continued misery'. Yet he is actually one of the relatively few defendants of exoticism and argues that exoticism is not 'necessarily false and evil' (42) but has a rightful place as in imaginary construction of the Other, or indeed the Self as Other, because politics and the imagination need to be kept separate. However, the majority of critics and scholars, especially in the West, see things differently and assume the position of moral gatekeepers. They expect world cinema filmmakers to continue the tradition of Third Cinema and use their films as platforms of postcolonial resistance, instead of becoming 'complicit' in exoticising their own culture, even if this entails potentially forsaking critical or commercial success. Much could be and has been written on this topic, which explains why exoticism is such a highly contested concept. However, to pursue this line of argument here any further is beyond the purview of my inquiry into the aesthetic characteristics of the exoticist paradigm.

The visual pleasure afforded by exotic spectacle is arguably the chief vehicle that allows world cinema to travel and be understood, or misunderstood, as the case may be, by cultural outsiders who are potentially disadvantaged by a hermeneutic deficit of culturally specific knowledge when trying to understand films from elsewhere. The emphasis exoticism places on sumptuous images and visual splendour shifts the attention from the film's deeper meaning (such as specific historical events, social conventions and interactions articulated in the narrative) to the surface 'which not only shines but *glosses*, which looks, stares, and

speaks' (Chow 1995: 150).⁵ Nowhere is this shift from the semantic core to surface appearance more apparent than in the films of Zhang Yimou which literally burst with bold saturated colours, a hallmark of his voluptuous visual style that is also emphasised in the titles of his films *Hong Gao Liang (Red Sorghum, Zhang Yimou, China, 1987)* and *Raise the Red Lantern*, and carefully composed painterly tableaus that invite audiences to feast their eyes on opulent interiors as well as on the enchanting beauty of Gong Li, 'the poster girl of Fifth Generation Chinese films (Khoo 2007: 1) and first actress in the post-Maoist period to gain global recognition. Her transnational appeal rests primarily on 'her ability to signify Chineseness, femininity and mystery outside her own culture. It is precisely these perceived "Oriental" qualities [...] that separate Chinese and Western audience preferences for Zhang's films and Gong Li's images' (Reynaud cited in Lu 1997: 126). In China, *Raise the Red Lantern* was initially banned and Chinese audiences preferred Zhang's visually less flamboyant *Quiju Da Guansi (The Story of Qiu Ju, China/Hong Kong, 1992)* and *Huozhe (To Live, China/Hong Kong, 1994)*, both films about ordinary people and a shared collective past and present. By contrast, Western audiences and critics were enthralled by this exotic spectacle which Zhang 'masterfully manufactured for the pleasure and gaze of the Western viewer' (Lu 1997: 126). The film premiered at the 1991 Venice Film Festival, where it won the Silver Lion and was subsequently nominated for the Academy Awards.

⁵ This is, however, not to say that *all* exotic films substitute glossy surfaces for deep meaning, thereby effectively compensating for the hermeneutic deficit that may arise when world cinema travels. Films like *Tanna, Embrace of the Serpent, Three Seasons, The Scent of Green Papaya, In the Mood for Love* and numerous other exotic films referenced in this essay are easily accessible in terms of their narrative and historical background to transnational audiences. Nevertheless, these films also rely on pictorialism, spectacle and visual pleasure for their transnational appeal.

Raise the Red Lantern is set in the 1920s and tells the story of Songlian (Gong Li), a nineteen-year-old girl who is forced by her stepmother to marry the much older Master Chen after her father dies and her family goes bankrupt. Chen has three wives already and Songlian, as his fourth wife or concubine, vies with the others for his attention and material favours and much jealousy and intrigue ensues. The film was shot in the classic three-strip Technicolor process to achieve a richness of reds and yellows no longer visible in Hollywood cinema which abandoned the three-strip Technicolor camera in 1954. Commenting on the film's captivating beauty, film critic Roger Ebert (1992) notes: 'There is a sense in which *Raise the Red Lantern* exists solely for the eyes. Entirely apart from the plot, there is the sensuous pleasure of the architecture, the fabrics, the color contrasts, the faces of the actresses'.

To be sure, in addition to their visual allure, the exoticism of *Raise the Red Lantern* and several other of Zhang's films also rests on established narrative tropes, notably that of the exotic-erotic-enigmatic Asian woman, frequently represented as a concubine, geisha, prostitute or simply the suffering wife of a much older oppressive husband. This prominent ethnic stereotype, which readily homogenises Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and other Asian women, is instantly legible as exotic. It has been deeply entrenched in the European imaginary of the Orient ever since Pierre Loti conflated exoticism and eroticism and his immensely popular novel *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) inspired Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and served as a template of Asian femininity in the popular imagination of the West (cf. Khoo 2007: 6; Heung 1997).

In most contemporary exotic films, visual pleasure is combined with haptic visuality (Marks 2000), denoting 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 that has conventionally been associated with exoticism. 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 (cf. Segalen 2002: 61). Thus, exotic world cinema 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).

Exoticism's multi-sensory appeal is especially evident in ethnic food films such as *The Scent of Green Papaya*, *Yin Shi Nan Nu (Eat Drink Man Woman)*, Ang Lee, Taiwan/USA, 1994), *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Politiki Kouzina (A Touch of Spice)*, Tassos Boulmetis, Greece/Turkey, 2003) and *The Lunchbox* (Ritesh Batra, India/France/Germany/USA/Canada, 2013), to mention but a few titles of this prolific genre. In these films, the preparation and consumption of food functions as a signifier of alterity. Close-ups of sizzling pans, steam rising from pots, the mixing of colourful herbs and spices seduce the spectator to experience with all of their senses the pleasures of Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Mexican or Indian cuisine – and not just that – but a whole way of life that 'inverts the current cultural terms of food' preparation and consumption 'by returning anachronistically to an era before mass production in which we imagine that the food we eat' is not only home-cooked but also reflects an emotional commitment of nurture and care, family values perceived to be rapidly disappearing in the West (Negra 2002: 64).

Figure 2: The widowed Mr Chu prepares elaborate banquets for his three daughters in *Eat Drink Man Woman*

The most critically acclaimed examples of global art cinema demonstrate that an aesthetics of sensuous indulgence, which combines visual pleasure with haptic visuality,

effectively compensates for the hermeneutic deficit that occurs when films are watched across borders. At the same time, this incomplete understanding of the film's deeper layers of meaning adds a residue of enigma and mystery. Hou Hsiao-hsien's first foray into the *wuxia* genre, *The Assassin*, deftly illustrates this. Set in the ninth-century China during the tail end of the Tang Dynasty, it tells the story of Nie Yinniang, a female assassin who is commissioned to kill a series of government officials. Although her martial arts skills are unsurpassed, on several occasions, her heart blocks her from completing her deadly assignments. On the film festival circuit, Hou won the award for Best Director at Cannes, amongst numerous other awards, and *The Assassin* was voted Best Film of 2015 in *Sight & Sound* magazine's film critics poll. Mark Lee Pin Bin's cinematography has been praised for its matchless 'compositional artistry' (Bradshaw 2016) and Wen-Ying Huang's production design for the 'visual extravagance of Oriental fantasies illuminated by brightly colored silk robes [...] and sensual atmosphere' (Young 2015).

Figure 3: *The Assassin* – vibrant colours and painterly image compositions convey sensual pleasure

Yet for all its prodigious beauty, the film's plot has ultimately remained 'obscure' and 'impenetrable' to all but the initiated (Bradshaw 2016). 'It is ravishing to watch – like being caressed by layers of precious silks', writes Wendy Ide (2015) in *The Times*, [but...] it is virtually impossible to unpick fully what is going on'. This sense of enigma and mystery is due to family and political intrigues that are the mainstay of the narrative coupled with the fact that 'there are two actresses playing double roles' (Clarke 2016). The film's narrative thwarts a long list of (Western) spectators' expectations such as the one-to-one match of actor and character, expository detail on the character constellations and their backstories, as well

as *wuxia*'s generic conventions. Hou reduces the customary fast-paced battle scenes, which are the genre's main attraction, to just a few brief moments. Dynamic pace and action are replaced by an eerie stillness and languorous observational distance. These features jointly contribute to the film's impenetrability which, in turn, engenders a sense of enigma that amplifies its exotic allure by confirming the belief that the Other can never be fully fathomed.

Conclusion

In this essay, I set out to demonstrate that world cinema and exoticism are both traveling concepts, constituted in and through transnational mobility and the process of traversing cultural boundaries and borders of various kinds. By bringing world cinema and exoticism into conversation with cultural translation I have sought to consider exoticism's heuristic potential outside the dominant ideological discourse and thereby challenge the overwhelmingly pejorative connotations surrounding the concept. Although world cinema inevitably reflects the look from the outside and therefore anticipates what the transnational critic/festival jury/spectator wants to see and although exoticism is an appropriate aesthetic strategy to fulfil these expectations, I am not suggesting that exoticism is the *only* mode of representation in world cinema. This would surely represent an untenable homogenisation of world cinema's actual diversity. Similarly, exoticism, though a prevalent interpretative model in the transnational reception of world cinema, competes with other ones, such as those which, indebted to Fredric Jameson's influential but controversial essay 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' (1986), conceive of world cinema in terms of national (or political) allegory. And, to end with yet another disclaimer, I may have conveyed the impression that contemporary world cinema merely recycles the exotic iconography and narrative tropes of the past without actually innovating the aesthetic paradigm and its ideological trajectory. This is certainly not the case. However, the limited

scope of this essay and its focus on developing a model of transnational reception precluded me from pursuing these other lines of argument. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Berghahn 2017), contemporary world cinema offers numerous examples of how exoticism is harnessed to new ethico-political agendas and a diverse range of humanitarian and ecological issues that have nothing in common with exoticism's tainted colonial legacy.

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