

AV FESTIVAL

POSTCOLONIAL CINEMA WEEKEND

Fri 7 March – Sun 9 March

This focus on postcolonial cinema explores the complex histories and material traces of past colonial inequalities through contemporary strategies across documentary and fiction including: manipulation of archival footage, re-construction, re-enactment and the essay-film. Each filmmaker addresses the very real ghosts of the colonial past. www.avfestival.co.uk

SATURDAY 8 MARCH

Yervant Gianikian & Angela Ricci Lucchi: *Images of the East, Barbaric Tourism*

Star and Shadow Cinema, Sat 8 March, 9pm, 62min, 2001

The cinema of Angela Ricci Lucchi and Yervant Gianikian is a cinema of fragments, of traces; theirs is a history cinema that paradoxically proclaims its ephemeral nature, not least by calling attention to the parallel processes of human and cinematic decay.

The rise of post-colonial thought, the new importance of ethnography for contemporary art practice, the turn towards documentary film, and the re-engagement with political and social realities – all these developments created a receptive environment for the work of Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi at the beginning of the 21st century. Their work provides a link between ethnographic cinema and the avant-garde, by using artistic strategies to construct a critique of European culture. Their works “frame the framer as he or she frames the other” (Hal Foster). Or as Judith Butler describes:

“The frame is always throwing something away, keeping something out, always de-realising and de-legitimising alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version. And so, when the frame jettisons certain versions of war, it is busily making a rubbish heap whose animated debris provides the potential resource for resistance.”

In *Images of the East, Vandal Tourism*, 2001, the filmmakers use footage shot in India by tourists in the late 1920s to illustrate the elitist attitudes of Westerners toward the Far East. The film contrasts the wretched life of the poor and malnourished with the sumptuous lifestyles of the Europeans.

The film represents a more sustained feature-length examination of European visions of the ‘exotic Other’. Commissioned by the television arts channel Arte, it was first screened at the Venice Film Festival as part of a programme entitled ‘New Territories’. The footage is largely drawn from Luca Comerio’s archive, though it is unclear how much was shot by Comerio himself nor for whom the film was made. The original film documents the visit to India of Edda Mussolini, daughter of the dictator, in 1928-9. It is likely that a reel covering the Tripoli part of the journey is missing. While not a state visit, the fact that the daughter of the Italian Head of State was part of the Italian party travelling to India explains the number and lavishness of

the receptions. However Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi carefully avoid mentioning Edda Mussolini in the notes and interviews that accompanied the release of the film so as not to distract attention from their principal concern – how the East is seen through Western eyes and how elite tourism prepared the way for mass tourism later in the century.

The filmmakers write: *“Iconography of Orientalism in documentary cinema. Europeans enter the “exotic realm”. A journey to India (...) The First World War had marked the end of the isolated traveller-explorer. The new “travellers” move in compact groups towards the exotic, towards its ruin. The journey takes place by ship, train, car, rickshaw, boat, elephant. Notes on the visual sensations, the local colour, the habits, the behavior of the travellers.”* Although in *Images of the East* there is the implication that Italian Fascist and British colonial attitudes converged regarding empire and European superiority, no devices are used – such as images of the Duce – to highlight this notion.

Gianikian has called *Images of the East* a ‘very formal film’. In part this is due to the importance of ceremony, from the official welcome on board ship in the port of Colombo in Ceylon (current day Sri Lanka) with the British governor-general and local notables in attendance to taking tea on the lawn of an official residence. The Italian visitors, according to Gianikian, seem to assume British manners and behave with comparable display of superiority towards the servants and native population. This behaviour, as a mode of exercising power, is studied by the filmmakers, who quote Henri Michaux: *‘the white man possesses a quality that has enabled him to make his way: disrespect. For the white man allows nothing to block his way.’* For Michaux, a traveller in Asia with a very different approach, the role of servants and servility was profoundly demeaning of the humanity of the server and the served.

The poor and the downtrodden are pictured by Michaux as lambs at the mercy of the powerful: *‘For the majority life is short, they are born to be ignorant, to have hunched shoulders, to die in airless places’*. On the soundtrack, his words are sung by Giovanna Marini in an incantatory lament. Diary entries for April-May 1930 describe the violent punishment meted out to Indian Nationalist protestors by the British authorities. Students finding sanctuary in the library where Eliade, a scholar of world religions, is working have burst eardrums, paralysed arms, and internal bleeding. He is shown a list of the dead. The terrible catalogue forms the soundtrack that accompanies images of the Italian guests relaxing and being served in the garden.

The formal qualities of *Images of the East*, also derive from the strategies used by the filmmakers such as slow motion and the close up. We observe the tourists observe, and, in turn, the camera’s own role in framing the world is made apparent. Simultaneously Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi produce a film of extraordinary beauty. However, beauty and horror are never separated out. Juxtaposed to the Delhi of trams, tree-lined boulevards and tall buildings are shots of the other India whose presence is otherwise communicated through the words of Michaux or Eliade. Indian are mostly in the background, part of the exotic scenery. A policeman on a wooden podium directs traffic, cars pass, followed by a camel; a holy man crosses mudflats in the direction of the river. For the cine-cameras following the tourists, and for the tourists with their cameras, Indians are part of the background.

However, Gianikian and Ricci Lucchi edit the material to give new prominence to the overlooked population and counter-pose the world of the colonised and that of the coloniser. They describe the strong contrasts, *‘On the one hand, the “man in the street” – the poverty-stricken shacks, the impoverished dancers, the fakir, the mutilated man, the naked children, malnourished and with swollen stomachs... On the other, the continuous exhibition of luxury and elegance at official receptions in the rich colonial residences and English-style gardens and parks.’*